

BIZARRE SEX



AND
OTHER
CRIMES
OF
PASSION

EDITED BY STAN TAL



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& OTHER CRIMES OF PASSION



A R I C H A R D K A S A K B O O K

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A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

GRAHAM WATKINS

I'd been told; I'd been warned. I knew that Marianne had planned something special for that evening. I knew it because she'd told me so the night before; she'd told me that, since it was going to be our last night together—since we were breaking up after almost two years of living together, since we were going to be going our separate ways—she was going to make it a night to remember.

Which meant that I, naturally, expected something intensely sexual—for Marianne, sex was everything. It was the center, the focus, of her life—I sometimes suspected it was the only thing of any significance to her. When I came home that evening, when I first saw her, I had no reason to anticipate anything different. She was waiting for me in the dining room. I could see her through the double doors as I came in, standing behind the table which she'd set with a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses. The lights were out; she had lit a couple of candles. She was dressed to kill—clinging black dress, fresh makeup, new hairdo, the works. For my personal taste, it wasn't possible for a woman to be any better looking than Marianne. She wore her dark hair

shoulder length, and her equally dark eyes were overlarge for her face, which I had several times heard described as “elfin.” She was short but long-legged, so her torso was really tiny. Her breasts weren’t large, but they were absolutely perfect, and her waist was so small that I could encircle it with my two hands. Looking at her then was enough to make me regret the decision I had made that had brought us to this moment—but not enough to change my mind.

I didn’t know then that the whole scene—the wine and the candles—and her—had been set up as a distraction. I didn’t expect to walk through the door and be jumped from behind by two huge men, men of such strength and skill that I had no chance at all trying to fight with them, men who proceeded to gag me and drag me unceremoniously off to our bedroom. That Marianne stood watching calmly as the men jumped me, that she trailed along saying nothing as I was carried off hardly made me feel any better.

Because of the way I’d been half-dragged and half-carried through my house, I didn’t get a good clear look at my attackers until I’d been tossed onto the bed. They were enormous, bearded, long haired; their arms were tattooed and they were wearing denim jackets with biker logos painted on them. I was terrified, but there was nothing I could do. I felt my arms being pulled backward, felt steel encircle my wrists, heard the click of handcuffs. There were more clicks. Raising my head, I saw my ankles being cuffed to the footboard of the bed and beyond that, I saw Marianne standing there watching, her face still impassive. As soon as I was secured, one of the men went over and turned on the small stereo I kept in the bedroom, turned it up loud enough to cause distortion. Then a gigantic meaty hand snatched the cloth from my mouth.

I’d like to be able to say I remained cool, but that wasn’t the case; I was already scared to the point of dizziness. I know I was sweating; I’m sure I was trembling as well.

“Marianne!” I shouted, fighting the cuffs even though I knew it was useless. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Just what I promised.” Her voice sounded distant. “I’m giving you a night to remember. Just wait and see. You’ll like it; I’m pretty sure of that. Remember, I know what you like.”

It was impossible to argue. Marianne did know me—sexually, at least—better than anyone else ever had. We'd met a few years earlier, when she was working as a dancer in a strip bar and I was a graduate student in business administration. Two more different people could not have been imagined, but we had certainly come together sexually. It wasn't that I was a virgin when we met, but she was far more experienced than I, and she taught me more new twists than I could count. For two fantastic years we lived together, we did everything together. But then things changed—I graduated. I was headed for a career in big business, headed for the big bucks, and there was just no way a stripper fitted into the life I planned for myself.

When I told Marianne it was over, that she would have to move out, her reaction had surprised me: I had expected tears, hysteria. Instead, after telling me exactly what a bastard she thought I was, she informed me that she had decided that her most reasonable course of action was to kill herself. The way she talked about it—you would have thought she was discussing selling her car—made me wonder how serious she was. Still, I couldn't leave things that way; I couldn't take the chance that she meant it. I tried to talk her out of it and eventually managed to extract a promise from her that she wouldn't do it right away, that she would think about it, that we'd talk about it some more. And, of course, I dropped my plans to have her move out—at least for the moment.

But we didn't have to talk about it anymore. A couple of days later, Marianne's manner changed completely; she thanked me for having prevented her from doing something foolish. At that same time she told me that she was leaving and said that she wanted us to have, as she put it, a night to remember. She said it would be very special; from her expression and from everything I knew about her, I had every reason to believe that she meant sexually. Throughout our relationship, Marianne turned every special situation into something special sexually.

But now, handcuffed to the bed, I wasn't so sure. Or, if it was, it wasn't going to be a sexual experience I was going to enjoy very much, in spite of what she had just said.

"I don't think I could enjoy much of anything, tied up like

this," I told her, forcing myself to be calm, trying to keep my voice from wavering. "Just get me loose and from here, and—"

She stood beside the bed and looked down at me with an enigmatic little smile. "Oh, come on!" She reached out and jingled the chain on one pair of the cuffs. "These are *our* handcuffs. You've had them on before; you've had them on me before. You enjoyed our games with them, I know you did."

I glanced at the men, who were both grinning from ear to ear. "You don't have to tell the fucking world!" I growled. "And anyhow, this isn't the same. Let me loose, Marianne!"

Her smile faded away. "No. Things won't work out right if I do." She looked around at one of the huge men. "This one okay, Harry?" She pointed toward a lamp sitting on the bedside table, a lamp that had a heavy marble base.

"Yeah," the larger of the men grunted in answer. "It's fine."

She picked it up, removed the shade, unplugged it. Wrapping her hand around the stem near the socket, she hefted it as if it were a hatchet. I'm sure I was quaking—sure my terror was written all over my face.

I stared at it fixedly. "What are you going to do with that? I demanded fearfully.

Glancing at me and smiling enigmatically once again, she put it down. "Nothing," she said. "Not a thing." She glanced back at her friends. "Time we got started," she said. The man she called Harry nodded and walked over to the bed. In his hands was a pair of scissors—familiar scissors, the pair I kept in my desk. I shrank from him as much as possible, but he tucked the scissors inside the leg of my pants and started cutting.

"Hey!" I yelled, relieved but indignant. "What the hell do you think you're doing? This is a goddamn tailored—"

"He has to," Marianne interrupted with a giggle. "How else is he going to get you undressed when you've got those handcuffs on?" She grinned at the man. "You be careful, Harry," she cautioned. "Don't you nick him with those."

"But...but...these are perfectly good clothes. Dammit, let me loose and I'll take them off. You don't have to ruin them, for Christ's sake!"

I was ignored. As if I hadn't even spoken, Harry proceeded to cut all my clothes to ribbons, destroying everything except my shoes and socks.

"You gonna dance now, Marianne?" the other man asked, tinkering with the radio, tuning in a new, harder-rock station—and turning it up yet a little more.

She started moving in time with the distorted music, and began taking off her new dress. "Yeah, Dober," she answered. "Yeah, just like I used to." She moved around the room, dancing in front of Dober, then Harry, then me; she hadn't lost a thing, didn't look out of practice at all. Some of my old fascination came back; she still struck me as incredibly beautiful and sensual. I watched her, forgetting temporarily about my situation.

Because I was watching her, I didn't notice—for a while, anyway—that the two bikers were also stripping down. Unlike Marianne, who was discarding each piece of her clothing wherever she was when it came off, they took theirs to a far corner of the room and laid them in a more or less neat pile. By the time they came back, Marianne was completely naked. They surrounded her, their hands all over her.

"So this is it!" I snarled as Marianne dropped to her knees in front of Dober and started mouthing his penis. She kept glancing up at me while she sucked him, adjusting her position so I could clearly see his organ pistoning in and out of her mouth. "This is your revenge, making it with these two in front of me, while I'm tied up here helpless. Well, if you think it bothers me, it doesn't."

Again they ignored me. Dober sat down on the edge of the bed beside my leg, Marianne kept her head in his lap, and Harry entered her from behind. The fear I had been feeling began to fade a little, began to be replaced by a certain anger. This wasn't the first time I'd seen Marianne having sex with another man; swinging and group sex had been among the variations she had introduced me to in the past two years.

But it was the first time I had watched her without being involved myself—either with her or with another woman. Besides, I was sure this was meant as a humiliation; and that, in

spite of the fact that watching her was still something of a turn-on, was more than enough to fuel my anger.

But it was short-lived; because, in the next few seconds, she managed to surprise me again. As if by a prearranged signal, Dober got up and Marianne moved up higher on the bed. While Harry continued to screw her from behind, she lowered her head over my groin and sucked in my semierect penis. It came all the way up instantly, in spite of my surprise—I surely hadn't expected to be included.

But I was. Harry roared and slammed himself against her hips; then he pulled out, let Dober have a turn, and he continued until he, too, had climaxed.

As soon as he had finished, Marianne crawled onto the bed and straddled my hips. Reaching around behind herself, she pushed my erection up against her soaking genitals and slowly slid herself down on it. Tousling her hair with her hands, she bounced on me for a few minutes. The two naked men remained very close, watching as she rubbed her breasts, played with her nipples. Then Dober produced another pair of handcuffs; Marianne put her hands behind her back and he snapped them on her wrists. She immediately began tugging against them as if she were trying to get loose. I couldn't help grinning a little. This, I figured, was for me. She knew I liked to see her cuffed, she knew I liked to see her struggling against restraints.

"I think it's about time, Harry," she said after about five more minutes. "He's beginning to get close."

"You sure about this, honey? Sure it's what you want me to do?"

"I'm sure," she answered, and I was sure I could hear her voice tremble just a little.

Of course, I didn't know what they were talking about. Looking up, I saw that Harry was pulling on gloves, and I started getting scared again. When he picked up a slender little box from the bedside table, I didn't know what was going on; but when he extracted from that box a brand-new four-inch switchblade, I was sure I did know. So sure I nearly panicked.

"Oh, no," I begged, feeling my stomach heave with terror, trying not to lose control of my bowels and trying desperately not

to screech incoherently. I was talking fast; *that* I couldn't control, *that* I didn't try to control. "No, Marianne, no! Tell him to put that thing away! It doesn't have to go down like this. Please, Marianne, please, let's talk about this first—"

She shook her head. "No. Go ahead, Harry. Let's get started."

"No, wait! Harry, look, I'll pay you! Just don't do this!"

Standing close beside me, he snapped the knife open and glanced at me. His eyes were utterly cold, absolutely feral. "I got no deal with you," he told me. "I do what I'm paid to do—no more, no less." He hooked a thumb at Marianne. "She paid." With a laugh, he tested the edge and the point with his finger. "It'd be a real good thing to slice off a pair of balls or a dick with."

"No, Harry." Marianne's eyes were huge, luminous. "Like we planned it, just like we planned. Go ahead, do it."

This was hardly comforting. I howled another protest; as always, I was ignored. I was yelling; I was squirming around in a frenzy; I was tearing my wrists on the cuffs; I was staring at that shining blade as Harry held it up. I was expecting to feel the cold steel any second—it seemed to me then that I could feel it already. When I saw Harry's arm tense, when I saw it come flashing down in the general direction of my groin, I screamed.

But either I misjudged the direction, or it changed. The knife didn't strike me, it struck Marianne; it sank deeply into her side, just under her ribs. I was utterly confused; I'm sure my eyes were as big as Frisbees. I had no idea why he had betrayed her, why he stabbed her instead of me.

"Oh, God," she whispered, her face tight and her own eyes huger than ever. "Oh, God, Harry—!"

"No backin' out now, honey," he said as the blade snicked out. Blood followed, spilling freely down her side.

"No, I don't want to back out!" Now she was the one who was grimacing, squirming, fighting the cuffs in spite of her words. I was stunned—lying there limply, staring. "Don't you pay any attention to me," Marianne went on. "You just go on and do it. Do it like we planned it, Harry, just like we planned it."

I was sure I understood then. "You told me you weren't going to commit suicide!" I screamed at her. "You lied to me!"

"I'm not," she answered innocently, looking back at my face.

"I'm not committing suicide. I told you I decided that was foolish. No, I decided to have myself murdered. That's what the law will call it, anyhow...." She leaned forward a little and studied my face. "And besides, you're getting off on it. You were fading away when you thought he was going to stick you, and now you're as hard as rock," she wheezed. She looked back down at herself and, through the pain, she even managed a tiny little smile. "He's going to do me again...watch close, now. Watch real close...."

There was little else I could do. We both watched while Harry brought the bloodstained blade down and began moving the point lightly around her lower abdomen, as if searching for some exact perfect spot. The tip was resting a few inches above the joint of her leg on the right when he stopped and suddenly buried the blade. She stiffened, trembled, made little whimpering noises. Dober grabbed her arms, helped her to remain upright.

"Goddamn it! Stop it!" I shrieked. "You're killing her!"

"Of course he is," Marianne surprised me by saying. "But Harry knows exactly what he's doing, he—ah! Ah! Oh, damn!"

Harry was extracting the knife again; she wasn't able to speak until he had finished.

"Goddamn it, Marianne!" I cried. "Tell him to stop!"

"You don't really want him to stop," she shot back, her voice now ragged and strained. "Anyhow, that's what your dick says."

She was certainly right about that. I tried to will my erection gone, but I had no success. "Please," I begged. "Stop this! It isn't worth it."

"Stop it?" She managed another smile. "Don't be silly, we have a long way to go yet." She looked up at the tattooed man. "Harry's a real expert. He knows how to make this last a long time."

"I don't want it to last a long time!" I shouted. "I want it to stop, right now!"

"It stops when you come," she said coolly. "It's all up to you; that's the way I planned it." She gave me an intense, almost feverish look. "You aren't going to be able to forget about me," she hissed. "Not ever, not ever. You'll never be free of me. You'll never be free of what's happening tonight."

"You're crazy!"

"Yeah, well. I've been told that before—lots of times. Harry. Do me again. Do me!"

I screamed again, but the big man leaned down and touched the point of his knife to her right breast, just above the nipple; carefully, gently, he started pushing it in. She started gasping and trembling again. I found it impossible not to be stimulated. I tried not to look at the steel that was sliding slowly into the soft flesh of her breast, at the bright red blood that was bubbling out around it, but I couldn't tear my eyes away.

"He's getting close," Marianne whispered raggedly to Harry. "I can tell. You'd better get ready."

"Anytime, baby," he replied, rocking the knife from side to side, working it deeper. She moaned and wriggled more, bringing me ever closer to the brink.

Then, as he was drawing it out, my climax began to rise. Marianne sensed it, and her eyes flew wide open. "Now, Harry, now!" she cried, her voice raspy and thready. "Now, he's starting to come! Make it good, Harry!"

He responded instantly. Being careful not to block my view, he put his arm around her shoulders and started plunging the blade into her, repeatedly and violently, concentrating on the area just inside her left breast below the nipple—the area of her heart. Blood sprayed in my face; her body became utterly rigid as my orgasm overtook me. I had a brief glimpse of her dying eyes before she went limp, before her head fell onto her chest—she, too, looked as if she was having an orgasm, a massive, overwhelming—and final—climax. Dober jerked her head back up and Harry stabbed her again, but by then her eyes were glazing.

Harry rolled her body off me and off the bed; it fell to the floor with a loud thud. "Goddamn," I muttered bitterly. "Goddamn, you didn't have to kill her!"

He laughed mirthlessly. "Sure I did. That's what she paid me to do, and I do the work I'm paid for." He shook his head. "And, well, she paid for more, too. Dober and me, we ain't done."

Concern for my own safety immediately replaced my outrage. "What else?" I demanded. "What else?"

He didn't answer. He approached me with the knife again, and again I begged and tried to squirm away. But he didn't really threaten me with it; instead, he placed it in my right hand and started pushing my fingers closed around it.

There was no mistaking his design. I fought him, but he was so much stronger that I had no chance of winning, I couldn't accomplish a thing other than to wiggle my fingers enough to smudge the prints that I was putting on it. He seemed unconcerned; unwinding my fingers, he stuck the knife back into Marianne's body and left it there.

"I suppose that you're going to call the law when you leave." I rattled the handcuffs. "There's no way this is going to work. You can't expect the police to believe I killed her while I was handcuffed to the bed."

"Yup," he agreed. "We're gonna call the law, all right. Gonna tell 'em we heard you and Marianne fightin'. But you won't be cuffed when they get here." He laughed. "This part—now, this part's gonna be fun. Ol' Marianne, she didn't know it, but she didn't really hafta pay us for this."

He fell silent, grinning at me; then he reached over to the bedside table and picked up the lamp, the one Marianne had so carefully handled earlier. Picked it up with his gloved hand.

"No, wait—" I cried.

"Ol' Marianne fought you. Tried to save herself. Poor little thing didn't make it. You killed her, you bastard."

Then he hit me in the chest with the base of the lamp. I yelled; he hit me again, and again, and again. The base slammed into my collarbone, and I heard it snap. I shrieked in pain. Harry roared with laughter and smashed his fist across my jaw. I found myself choking on a tooth; blood streamed out of my nose.

Finally he hit me in the head. I saw the lamp coming, saw that heavy base descending; there was an explosion of incredibly bright lights, after which everything went black.

I guess Harry and Marianne planned for me to come around sometime before the police arrived, that I'd either get caught wandering around in a daze in the house or that I'd be on the run. But—to make a long story short—Harry had screwed it up,

he had beaten me much too badly. I didn't come around for a couple of days; and when I did, I was in the hospital. I had a fractured skull, a broken collarbone, missing teeth, internal injuries—the works. I wasn't right for a long time, but it was for the best. The police, who certainly seemed inclined to believe, at first, that I had murdered Marianne, just couldn't make the scenario work. If I had stabbed her first, she wouldn't have had the strength to bash me so severely with the lamp, fingerprints or no; and if she had bashed me first, I certainly couldn't have stabbed her. I'm making all this sound very clean and easy, I know, but you can rest assured it wasn't. I spent thousands on a lawyer, I spent more thousands on a bail bondsman, I spent what at least seemed like thousands of hours being questioned. My reputation was demolished; all the interviews I had lined up had canceled after the murder hit the papers.

Nor did I tell the police—or the lawyers—the truth. I figured they wouldn't believe what really happened, so I made up a story about two guys breaking in, about them raping and killing Marianne and leaving me for dead. When the medical examiner verified that there was more than one man's semen in her vagina, it clinched my case. The judge dismissed it; I walked away free.

Well, now I'm trying to pull my life back together. I have a job. It's okay, but it's hardly what I was hoping for. No, Harry and Dober haven't been caught; I told the police that the guys that broke in were black, gave them off-the-wall descriptions.

Why? Well—I don't know if you can understand. Maybe it's like gambling for some people, or whiskey, or cocaine—I wouldn't know. I'm no gambler; I don't drink much, I don't do drugs. All I know is that I keep going over and over that night in my mind: Marianne was right; it sure was a night to remember. What I want is—well, I want to do it again. Without the handcuffs, without the beating. I figure Harry and Dober are the guys who could make that happen, and that's why I've protected them. That's why I'm looking for them.

You—uh—you haven't seen them around, have you? I'd pay you for the information. I'd pay you well....



BAPTISM AT MOTEL 6

MATTHEW J. PALLAMARY AND PHILIP C. WILLIAMS

"Look out!" Bonnie screamed.

The open bottle tumbled off the busboy's tray, splattering catsup across the onionskin pages of her leather-bound New Testament.

"Shit," he muttered, setting the tray down on Bonnie's table. "Sorry about that. Let me get a towel." He hurried away.

Bonnie's liquid eyes focused on the thick red dollop now obscuring the second Epistle of Peter. In her former life—before being born again—she might have said "shit," just like the busboy. Maybe even "goddammit."

She tried her best to read an unstained verse or two while she waited, but the sight of the splattered catsup imprinted itself on her mind.

Mommie? I'm home. Where are you?

Mommie?

Candles. Hundreds of flickering candles, dying in puddles of wax on the hallway floor.

Mommie?

The double bed. Mommie—her legs apart—Daddy on top. Naked. Ramming his thing into her body. Bright red stains on the sheets. More candles.

Mommie!

"You all right, miss?" The busboy stared down at her, towel in hand.

Bonnie shook off the reverie, her glazed expression sharpening. "Sorry. Must have been daydreaming."

The busboy wiped the catsup off the page, leaving a faint pink smear. "Sorta gives me the willicies," he said.

She frowned.

He pointed. "Messing up your Bible like that."

Bonnie reached forward, touching him on the wrist. "Jesus forgives all our sins." She smiled easily, her green eyes contrasting with reddish brown freckles.

"Would you like some more iced tea?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, thanks. Jesus calls me back to the road."

"You hitchin'?" He shook his head. "That ain't real safe for a woman."

She rose from the booth and smiled. "I never worry about where my next ride will come from or who the driver will be. I've come all the way from Pennsylvania"—she tapped the Bible with her index finger—"the Good Lord always provides." She bowed her head and walked out the door.

A chilly October wind swept a cloud of dust into her face as she crossed the deserted parking lot and stood on the shoulder of the access road. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and glanced down at her watch. Past five o'clock. One more ride—the one that might possibly take her into California. She adjusted the denim knapsack on her shoulders and began to sing off-key:

"Oh, He has washed their robes
Their sinful, sinful robes
In the sweet, sacred blood
Of the Lamb.
And he will—"

The noise of an approaching car interrupted her. She thought the car had stopped to pick her up until the passenger door opened and a young man with long brown hair pulled back in a ponytail hopped out.

"Thanks for the ride," he called. The car sped away.

He turned and saw Bonnie. A half-smile erupted and he said, "Heading west?"

She nodded.

"Mind if I join you? I'm on my way to Frisco."

Bonnie shrugged. San Francisco. Her destination as well, but there were disadvantages traveling with a man. Folks who might pick up a woman standing alone often avoided picking up hitchhikers in pairs. On the other hand, she liked the idea of having someone to talk with during a long wait. Plus.... No.... She couldn't allow herself to think about.... But he *was* attractive. He reminded her of a painting of John the Baptist in her Sunday school classroom back in Pennsylvania.

"Not too talkative, I see." He smiled broadly, his blue eyes dancing behind smooth cheeks and forehead. "My name's Clyde Proudfoot." He offered his hand.

Bonnie hesitated before reaching toward him, stopping at the moment of contact.

"What's that?" She jerked her hand back, pointing to a series of blue lines etched in his palm.

"Shake first. Then I'll tell you about it." He grabbed her hand and shook it. She kept her wrist limp and withdrew her fingers quickly after the second pump.

He chuckled and opened his hand revealing a blue pentagram and crucifix tattooed in his palm. It looked as if red droplets were oozing from Christ's hands, feet, and side. From Bonnie's perspective, Christ's head and the crown of thorns pointed menacingly down at her shoes.

"Oh!" she covered her mouth with her hand.

"Does it scare you?" Clyde chuckled. "I can make him wiggle when I do my fingers like this." He rolled his fingers, sending the body and blood of Christ into grotesque spasms.

"Stop it!" Bonnie screamed. "That's terrible!"

Clyde laughed as a gust of cold wind swept between them.

Bonnie considered running back to the diner, then thought better of it. God had brought this man to her for a reason. She reached back into her knapsack and drew out the Bible. It fell open to the second Epistle of Peter, still slightly stained with cat-sup.

She read aloud, "Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you; having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls..."

He raised his eyebrows. "What the hell is that?"

"The Holy Word of God." She smiled at the open Bible, then shut it.

"You really read that stuff?" he asked.

"Every word." She nodded, then looked away when she felt herself staring into his eyes. His rugged face looked almost too handsome.

"Looks like we're in luck." Clyde motioned eastward toward an approaching pickup, its well-worn brakes squealing as it slowed to a stop.

The driver wore a green cap with JOHN DEERE lettered across the brow. A load of boxes partially obscured the passenger seat. "Sorry I ain't got no room up front," he called out, when Clyde rested his hand on the frame of the open window. "But there's plenty of room back there." The farmer gestured with his thumb.

Clyde grinned. "Beats walking." He turned to relay the message to Bonnie, but she had already climbed onto the truck bed and pulled a blanket out of her knapsack. He chuckled and looked back at the driver. "Where you heading?"

"San Francisco," the man said, patting the boxes. "Got to deliver these invoices to my accountant." He winked. "Plus, it gives me an excuse to check out the beach."

"You planning to make the whole trip tonight?"

The farmer shook his head. "Too far. There's a Motel 6 in Winnemucca. You can catch a ride there if you don't want to spend the night."

The old Ford roared and strained in third gear when the farmer reached cruising speed. The two hitchhikers sat with

their backs against the cab in order to break the harshness of the wind.

"You never told me your name," Clyde said over the noise.

"Bonnie." She kept her eyes fixed on the receding highway.

"Just Bonnie?"

She set her jaw and adjusted the blanket around her neck without answering. She wanted to take out her Bible, but knew the wind would flutter the pages.

Clyde hesitated a moment, then let out a whoop. "Bonnie and Clyde! I don't believe it." He reached over, grabbed her shoulder, and shook it. "Don't you get it? Bonnie and Clyde! What do you suppose the chances are of *that*?"

She smiled in spite of herself and pulled the blanket tighter. She noticed that Clyde's bare hands were pink from exposure to the cold wind.

She frowned. *He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that have none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise.* There seemed to be no choice.

"Would you like to share my blanket?"

He turned to face her, a surprised look on his face. "What?"

She lowered her head. "My blanket," she said softly. "It's big enough for two. You want to share?"

He grinned. "Thanks." He slid closer toward her.

She blushed. "Don't thank me, thank Jesus." She held up a corner of the blanket for him to crawl under.

He pulled it over his chest and snuggled against her.

She turned her head away.

"What's Jesus got to do with it?" he asked. "You're the one with the blanket."

"*He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none,*" she responded. "That's what Jesus said."

Clyde looked thoughtful. "You really believe all that, don't you?"

She nodded. "Every word."

"What verse did you quote back there? Something about adultery?"

"Second Peter. It's about the ungodly, how they try to beguile God's chosen."

"You think I was trying to do that?" He frowned. "Beguile you?"

"That's what it seemed like." She frowned. "The way you played with that tattoo and all." She searched for his hand under the blanket and touched his palm with her index finger.

He jumped. "Jesus Christ!" Then laughed. "Yeah, *Jesus Christ*." He laughed again and shook his head.

Bonnie's frown deepened. "Why did you let them put that awful tattoo on your hand?"

Clyde stopped laughing. "Seems sort of stupid, now that you mention it."

"I've never seen a crucifix like that before."

"Satanism." A cloud of vapor trailed from his lips toward the rear of the truck as he exhaled.

Bonnie's head jerked around. "What? You mean—"

"That's right." He nodded. "The Dark Lord." He spoke the words reverently.

"Why would anyone...?" Bonnie choked.

"Drugs, parties. It was fun watching Christians get upset." He smiled sheepishly, then stared down at his lap. "That all happened a long time ago." He cleared his throat. "To be honest with you, I'm sort of ashamed about this afternoon." He pulled his hand out from under the blanket, holding the crucifix head upward. "I wonder if there's some way I can get rid of it."

"The important thing is what's in your heart." Bonnie smiled, then arched her brow. "What kind of stuff did you do? When you worshipped Satan, I mean."

"All I remember is the ritual sacrifices. Animals, mostly." He looked away, as if speaking to the cactus silhouettes in the passing desert. "I was always pretty stoned."

Bonnie's eyes grew wide.

He turned and stared at her, his eyes gathering intensity as he spoke. "Hard to say what happened the rest of the time. We had a lot of stuff. You know. Group hypnosis. Alcohol. Dope." He spoke of the sex, blood sacraments and the secret feeling of power the priest who led the sacrifices claimed to have. Suddenly Clyde stopped. "Sometimes I'd wake up and think I dreamed the whole thing."

Bonnie cocked her head to one side. "Aren't you curious about what you don't remember?"

He stared at the crucifix, "I only remember feeling good—you know, sex. But I don't like to think about it." He drew the blanket closer to his chest. "It's kind of a blur. I vaguely remember symbols drawn in blood, candles..."

"Sex? Candles?" Bonnie's hand flew to her mouth.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Let's don't talk about it anymore." She looked away.

An hour later, the truck pulled into a motel parking lot.

"This is as far as I go," the farmer called over his shoulder. "The rooms here are the cheapest around." He paused. "Or you can try your luck over there." He pointed to the entrance ramp leading back to the freeway.

"Thanks." Clyde turned to Bonnie. "Guess I'll be shoving off."

"Why's that?" she asked as they both climbed out of the truck.

He gestured toward the motel office. "Sign says SINGLES \$26. I've only got twenty bucks."

"I've got some money. Wanna share?"

Clyde's jaw dropped.

Bonnie shrugged. "Why not? We spent the last hour under the same blanket, didn't we?"

He gaped at her. "I thought I freaked you out back there."

She giggled. "Oh, for heaven's sake. Men don't worry me. Even you with all your Satan talk. Anyway, you said it happened a long time ago." She thought a moment. "Besides, I've got the Holy Word of God." She reached through the gap in her knapsack and pulled out her Bible, then stepped into a brightly lit circle near the office awning and flipped through several pages before reading. "'The word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword...'" She looked up. "I've got all the protection I need."

He grinned back. "Sounds great to me. I haven't slept on a real bed in weeks."

After they had paid for the room, Clyde lay back on the pillow, hands locked behind his head, elbows out. Bonnie tossed her

knapsack on the bed beside him and went to the sink to wash her face.

"Planning on some Bible reading?" he asked.

"Maybe later." She dried her face with a towel, then stretched out on the bed beside him. "I thought we could talk first."

"Yeah." He nodded. "You know, I've argued with a lot of Jesus freaks before, but you're different." His eyes softened. "I really enjoyed our talk."

"Me too." She slid her hand down to his thigh. Her fingertips grazed his groin while her other hand moved up to the V of his shirt collar and unbuttoned it. "You know, you're awfully nice-looking."

His face flushed. "Hey, look, Bonnie. You're really nice-looking too," he stuttered. "I mean, I think you're terrific, but...but I'm not so sure I want to—you know—anything physical...."

She ran her tongue across her lips.

"Maybe it was that stuff you read to me. I really listened."

Her hand moved in slow, rhythmic movements, dancing back and forth over his hardening crotch. She found the second button of his shirt with her mouth, then the third. He trembled while she pulled his collar all the way open, exposing his neck.

"I don't understand."

Her lips nuzzled his chest hair.

"All that stuff about your religion," he said. "I really listened."

"I know." Bonnie opened his shirt all the way, undid his belt and worked his pants down. He moaned a feeble protest when her mouth found his penis. She moved quickly, her lips and tongue sliding up and down its length, coaxing and teasing it to the brink of release. Suddenly she backed off.

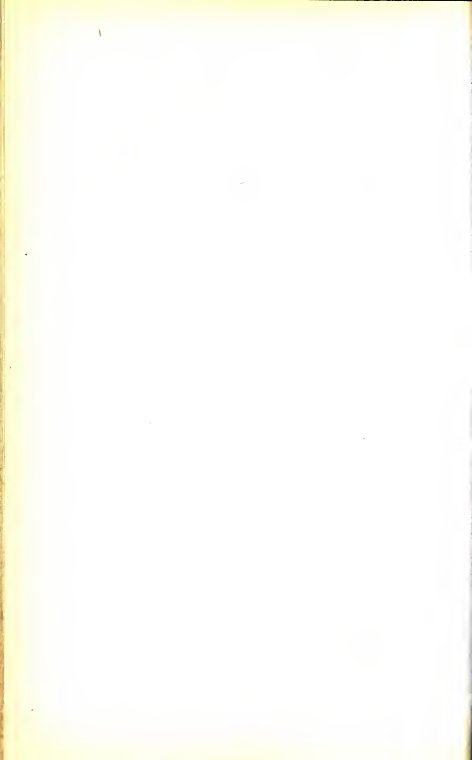
Clyde stared wide-eyed as she wiggled out of her jeans and pulled off her blouse. Bonnie crawled on top of him, straddling his penis, and he gasped when she lowered herself onto his penis and began squirming and writhing. She was hot and wet and dripping.... The smell of their sex intoxicated him. Clyde closed his eyes and, grabbing her buttocks with both hands and pushing one finger past the tight juncture between them into her anus, returned her urgent rhythm with thrusts of his own.

She ran her eyes over his delicious body. Bonnie sighed and, arching her back, gazed up at the light and closed her eyes. The image that remained was like the soft glow of a candle. Then, slowly, the vision of a room full of candles unfolded, and...and the bodies of her mother and father, doing it—like she was now. How had it felt for them?

With her free hand, she reached into the knapsack. The moment Clyde shuddered and let go inside her, the long blade of her knife flashed in the lamplight, cutting through his vocal cords, ripping diagonally through the carotid artery. A plume of bright crimson shot from the jagged wound, splattering Bonnie's face and breasts.

"You poor, innocent lamb," she said, her green eyes bright with passion, her cheeks spangled with blood. "You weren't the only one listening. 'A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.'"

Before leaving the room, she pulled the dripping blade out of his neck, opened the palm of Clyde's hand—the one with the crucifix tattoo—and wrapped the body of Christ around the handle of the knife.



LADY FILTH

OCTAVIO RAMOS, JR.

Larry Jacobs sat in a brightly lit room, messing around with two friends. Red-brick walls and a concrete floor made their surroundings look like a prison, and only an old, rusting stairway reminded the men that they were underground. They sat at a table filled with liquor, cash, cards, chips, and a few scattered magazines. Around them, in all its glory, reeked filth.

The filth took many forms. In one corner, it was several piles of shrink-wrapped dirty magazines, each consisting of several pages—the paper thick, glossy, and in living color. And on the covers: *Dirty Diva*. *Hot Nights*. *Back-Door Man*. *Leather-spiked Nuns*. And there were taunts: for real men only, double penetration inside, only done in the dark. Most important of all, in bright neon pink, was the fifteen-dollar price tag.

In the adjacent corner stood approximately twenty kilos of pure snow, bagged and ready for distribution. Next to the brown packages rested four automatic weapons.

In the opposite corner were sexual novelties and “marital” aids: dildos, paperbacks, complete kits, leather nighties, whips, and other homey items. And, resting among them were manu-

als on every method of sex, sadism, exhibitionism, and fetishism ever devised by mankind.

The final corner had a stack of long, coffinlike cardboard boxes. Inside each was a doll—a doll for a lonely man. These dolls were not mere plastic. Oh, no. Each had flesh tone, each was made from synthetic materials, each with devices to simulate oral, vaginal, and anal satisfactions.

"Well?" Larry stared at the balding man.

"I call."

Chips clinked on the wooden table.

"And you?"

A fat man sat back, in his hands a magazine called *Chunky Asses*.

"Whatever."

"Jesus!" Larry slicked back his greasy black hair and put his cards down. "Flush—like in a toilet." He chuckled as he adjusted the plastic gloves covering his bony hands.

"Damn."

"Whatever." The fat man opened to the centerfold. "Kee-rist!"

Larry grabbed the magazine and tossed it into the pile. "If you want some of that stuff, go out and pay!"

"Sorry, boss."

"Enough! Listen up. I want this stuff on the street—as in right now. Joey, make sure Duke gets the 'sugar.' And you, asslover, get the smut out. Freaky Freddie gave us a huge order—you treat him real nice." Larry laughed. "I gotta go shake some steak loose. Besides, this piss-ante poker game is a bore, not to mention the company."

As Larry stalked up the stairs, the bald man yelled, "The cash will be in tomorrow."

"Damn well better be."

"Hey, Larry?"

"What now, fatso."

"What about the cops, or the DEA?"

Larry chuckled. "I'm untouchable, fats." He rubbed his hands with imaginary soap, the plastic gloves crackling to the frenzied motion. "There's filth all around me, but I always make damn sure it never touches any part of my beautiful, clean body."

"You're weird, Larry."

Larry laughed nervously. "No, man—I'm clean."

Larry slammed the Cadillac's brakes and motioned to two hookers. Both women glided over from their concrete and one stuck her head into the open window, exposing a pair of ebony jugs.

"Yo, Larry." She popped her gum, her lips curling like day-old bread.

"How's business, Elaine?"

"Seven knocks on the door, baby. Angelica's hot to go, but—"

"But what?"

"She hasn't had a john yet. But she's been working the streets. She really—"

Larry snapped his fingers, cutting her off. Both Angelica and Elaine looked worried, but Larry laughed and joked it off. He was about to make a big killing and was in a generous mood.

"Climb in and get warm. Tell you what, girls. I've got a new bed. Why don't you two break it in for me, like you did the last one."

The girls laughed, happy to be off the street where they were freezing their asses off between tricks.

"You know what, Larry?" Angelica said, lighting a lid. "You're one filthy *muchacho*."

"Not me," he exposed a mouth sporting three gold teeth. "I only attract filth."

The morning oozed through the closed curtains, awakening Larry Jacobs from a deep malaise. He breathed deeply, staring up. The ceiling mirror reaffirmed the naked image of himself. All that was left of the girls was their sweaty outlines on the stained satin sheets. Now even coming in contact with the sheets gave Larry the willies. He took a long, hot shower. It took a while to get the circulation in his organ going, but eventually the heat brought it up. Cocaine, sex, rock-and-roll; he loved it all. Drugs made rock-and-roll, screwing generated rock and roll, and when you rock-and-roll—it's rock-and-roll. And the money—that was filthier than everything else. He loved it. He attracted it. But he didn't want to touch it, or have it touch him.

When Larry emerged from the shower, his eyes focused on a box sitting on the coffee table. The long brown box looked familiar. He towed off and, still naked, went over to the box. On it was a note: "Dear Larry, Since we're too filthy for you to have sex with, here's something you can do forever, without worry."

Curiosity swept over Larry's face. He knelt and opened the box. Laughing, he said under his breath, "Naturally."

Its hair was a lion's mane: brown tresses cut short up front and long at the back. Its face looked as smooth as porcelain, yet its features stood out clearly, as if a sculptor had worked many long hours on each one. Two green eyes with bushy eyebrows and eyelashes centered a Grecian nose, its point pencil sharp. Below the nose was not a fake pucker, but a full-lipped mouth. A strong chin curved down to a long neck, which swept out to wide shoulders. Large, firm breasts rested against a thin frame with a flat belly. A small, round navel led to a beautiful tuft of pubic hair and, just below, a deep pink cleft.

And her arms were wicked and her legs were long, Larry thought. He laughed again and said, "Hellooooo, I love you." He removed the doll from the box and tossed it onto the bed. "Why didn't I think of this before?" he said aloud. "The perfect way to fuck without touching filth."

Two devices, one for the mouth and one for the pelvis, sat in the box, as did a small booklet. On the cover was a picture of the tan doll. In red ink, the title read: "Hi! My name is Lydia!" However, someone had crossed out the name and in its place had written "Lady Filth."

"Lady Filth. Smartasses!"

The previous night's drinks and voyeuristic delights started to catch up, and Larry felt a headache coming on. He decided to check with Joey. He picked up the phone and dialed.

No answer.

"Great! What the fuck are they doing?"

Larry put the phone down, picked it up again, and began calling his stable. Not one of his ladies answered.

"Fuck!"

He needed to get dressed and check out what was going down, but...

His eyes drifted down to the doll.

The perfect fuck. No disease, no smartass talk and, best of all, no filth. He'd give it a try...then he'd go find his boys and girls, and kick some ass.

First, Larry washed his hands—an old habit. He propped Lady Filth against two pillows with its mouth slightly open, exposing a set of plastic teeth and a mobile tongue. Four wires hung on its left side, two on its cheeks, and two on its pelvis. He went to the closet and put on his best tuxedo. Then, back to the bathroom, where he slicked up his hair and splashed cologne on his face and neck.

Larry walked into the room as if he were a male whore in the most exclusive and most expensive bordello in wicked Paris.

"Hey, sweetheart. My name's Lawrence Jacobs. I charge five hundred an hour, a grand if you want it to hurt." Then, mimicking the doll, he crooned, "Ooooh! Please, Mr. Jacobs. Hurt me!" He smiled. "Why, of course." He strutted to the side of the bed.

As if on cue, the four speakers clicked on. Jazz. Hot, slinky jazz. Larry fell out of character, performing the old bump-and-grind like a low-life stripper. The tie went first, followed by the coat, vest, and shirt. He began to dance again, tightening his ass when the cymbals crashed. Slowly, he removed his shoes, socks, and trousers. The briefs weren't far behind.

The doll stared.

Larry tossed some pillows onto the red carpet; then, on a whim, picked the doll off the bed and threw it onto the floor. One flick of a switch, and the doll's mouth opened wide. Larry sat on its face, his testicles resting on its chin.

The doll spoke with a computer-simulated voice, startling Larry. "My name is Lydia. I want you inside me. Take your choice of openings, lover."

Jesus! This was better than anything he could have imagined. Sweat popped out from all his pores. Never had a woman given him such a stiff one. And, somehow, the fact that he was in complete control put him on edge. Passion and lust were his alone, as was his satisfaction. It was dirtier than life. He could go beyond human filth; indeed, there were no boundaries to his

imagination and no woman to object to pain or overindulgence.

Larry teased its face a bit and its mouth formed an O around his cock. The machine hummed as the mouth began to contract and expand. The tongue moved, the cheeks flooded with saliva; the teeth kneaded his flesh, the computer making sure the pressure allowed only scratching and nipping, never cutting the flesh. The voice synthesizer grunted, moaned, and gasped.

Larry held his breath for a moment, then gasped with pleasure. The machine's timing and control drove him mad. In a frenzy, he deep-throated the doll. It took every inch, feeling as tight and warm as a real throat. The wax deep inside the doll burned the head of his cock, driving him to spasms of passion.

The doll was better than the real thing. Its lips were moist, its teeth hard, its gums soft, its tongue raspy, its tonsils cold, its breath hot, its throat tight, and its grunts filled with satisfaction. And it never had to breathe.

Lady Filth reeked lust.

Larry continued to ram himself into its mouth, the machine taking all of him, performing better than any woman. The doll, all lust and no love, released its manufactured pheromones, coating the room with filth.

Then came the terror.

The terror took its time, but its smell permeated every air molecule in the room. Larry felt it and tried to pull back.

Glassy eyes, like those of models in the millions of pornographic magazines and movies, stared into his eyes. The mouth continued its work. His organ felt close to eruption.

Then Larry noticed the wires. They were no longer connected to the doll.

"Hi, Larry." The sound croaked from the side of the doll's mouth.

"Jesus!"

"It's me, Larry. Lady Filth. I've finally come to stay. Permanently. I think we'll make a beautiful couple. You and me. Like this. Forever."

Larry tried to pull back, but this time the teeth scratched. In a panic, he tried to pry the doll's lips apart. They failed to budge.

More saliva covered his cock.

In vain, he pounded on the doll's face. He tried to ease out. That failed. Fear warmed his body, oddly stiffening his cock even more.

And it still felt good.

But it wasn't supposed—

"Let me gooooo!"

The doll's lips smacked as Larry almost reached the point of climax, only to lose it again. The doll had complete control. It worked him to the edge, eased off, then started the process all over again.

"Why?" he whined, his fear permeating the room.

"Because you're filth." The doll's eyes sparkled. "And I'm filth, too, Larry. Here only for your pleasure. And you love it."

Larry screamed and the mouth worked harder. Slowly, he lost all identity of self.

Screaming and screaming and screaming...

Indeterminable time passed. The game continued.

Larry knew nothing of himself. Passion, lust, greed, power and fear spilled from his body. No thoughts penetrated his fevered mind. Larry lay there, consumed in his own bodily filth. All he could do was moan as Lady Filth drained everything but filth from his brain.

In time, even Larry's filth would drain away. And when it did, it would find an outlet.

Filth would always survive.



SUCCUBUS

GARY COUZENS

She's there in the room with him. A light gust of wind from the open fanlight ruffles the curtains momentarily into the outline of her face. He feels her stare on the back of his neck as he makes love to Wendy, enters her, begins to thrust.

The stare. More intense now.

And then it happens again. Helpless, he feels his erection soften; his limp penis slips out of Wendy's vagina. His face screws up in hurt, and he hits the pillow with the flat of his hand.

"Shit!"

Wendy is sitting up now, hands on his shoulders as he turns away.

"Pete, don't worry about it."

"What the fuck is the matter with me?"

"It's all right. It's okay, it can't be helped."

Her common sense, like drops of cool water soothing the angry heat inside him, dissolving the knots. He turns to her. Her face, open, solicitous, eyes wide and unfocused.

She's blind as a bat without her glasses. An irrelevant thought, but it hijacks his mind, prevents him from taking any comfort

in her. They lie on the bed, pulling up the disturbed sheets to cover themselves. She puts an arm about his shoulders, closes her hand gently around his penis in an attempt to revive it. She lets him stroke her long hair, place his hands on her breasts. No good. His body is taut, unresponsive. His penis lies limp, a pink slug in her palm.

How can he tell Wendy? He can't.

The other woman's face forms briefly again in the folds of the curtain.

A jealous mistress, indeed.

Wendy sits across the table from Pete, watching him carefully, but equally careful not to be obvious about it. He is resistant to too much concern; in their two years together, it was the first thing she found out about him.

Probably mothered too much, she thinks.

They have lived together for a year now, sharing this rented flat. Wendy would like to get married, would like a family (two children, one of each sex); but, they have decided, not until she finishes her doctorate.

"What are you doing today?" Pete asks, looking up from his cornflakes.

"There's a seminar on George Eliot this morning, and I've got to take a tutorial group on *Jude the Obscure* this afternoon. Rest of the time I'll spend in the library. I really must finish *Daniel Deronda*. How about you?"

He shrugs. "Haven't really decided. Might go for a walk. I dunno."

"Get you out of the house a bit."

"Yes, Mum." He smiles.

Wendy knows he stays in the house a lot. Most of his friends went back home after they graduated. While she got a grant to do a master's in English, he didn't. He's signed on at various agencies for temporary work, but nothing is forthcoming at the moment. Many days he stays in and watches videos: the horror movies she dislikes, the ones they don't rent to watch together.

She's glad he's smiling. It can't be much fun for him, stuck at home as he is. The impotence is a recent thing, and they

must talk it through. She wants very much for them to talk. Has she let him down, being out all day and studying much of the evening? No; she has suggested that, and he denied it hotly. He doesn't feel disadvantaged by her academic success. (A middle 2.1 isn't anything to be ashamed of, at any rate, but grants are hard to come by in liberal arts subjects and you need a First or very near it.) Quite the opposite; he prizes her intelligence.

Breakfast over, she packs her bag and puts her coat on. It is November, and chill is setting in. There's an icy wind that cuts to the bone, so Pete doesn't follow Wendy to the bus stop. They kiss good-bye on the doorstep.

She walks down the road, feeling the cold through her shoes, even through her thick skirt. *I should've put on another petticoat, thicker tights.* She stops at the newsagent's on the corner and buys a *Guardian*.

She catches a glimpse of a woman walking past her, back up the way she's just come. *She's very good-looking,* thinks Wendy. The woman is wearing a gray coat, and long blonde hair—*is that natural? Looks it*—tumbles over the collar. Her features are delicate, defined even more sharply by eyeshadow and lipstick. Standing outside the newsagent's, Wendy finds herself looking at the woman's retreating back, the click of her high heels loud on the pavement. There's something about this woman that draws Wendy's gaze, some look in the blue eyes that compels her. Wendy shakes her head. *Who is she?* she thinks. *I've never seen her before. I wonder what brings her to these parts, who she's going to see.* She looks again down the road, but the woman has gone. Wendy walks away, towards the bus stop.

Pete shuts the door behind Wendy and glances at his watch. 8:15. It's usually about this time. It's usually about this time. He hurries back up the stairs to the flat. His heart is beating fast as he opens the door, so fast he's almost sick with anticipation.

The woman is sitting on his bed, resting on one hand. Her gray coat opens over her crossed thighs, clad in fishnet stockings. Her long blonde hair falls partly over her face. She looks up as he comes into the room, throws her head back to get the hair out of her eyes. She stands up.

Already his penis is stiffening. He walks up to her and she smiles and stands against the bedroom wall.

Slowly she unbuttons her coat...and lets it slip to the floor. Underneath she wears a black underwired bra and sheer black panties he can see her pubic hair through. Holding up her stockings is a black garter belt.

He moves over to her, and she puts her arms about his shoulders in a clinch. Her skin is smooth and soft, with a marble coolness from the outside. She kisses him and entwines her tongue with him. He scrabbles frantically behind her back, trying to get a purchase on the clasp of her bra. He manages to undo it and buries his face in her full, subtly perfumed breasts. She unbuttons his shirt and slips it off him and undoes the belt of his trousers. He pushes his trousers and underpants to the floor. His penis is fully erect now.

Calmly she unhooks her garter belt and drops it to the floor, then slides off her stockings. Pete grasps hold of her panties, kneading her buttocks through the flimsy fabric before pulling them down. The woman stands against the wall, legs apart and raised slightly. She takes hold of his finger and inserts it gently into her vagina, which closes around it, warm and moist. But his arousal can't be put off much longer, and he holds her against the wall with his hands and enters her, sinking his penis in as far as it will go. Her vagina holds him like a warm soft glove and he begins to thrust. She holds his head against her breasts with one hand and rests the other on his buttocks. His thrusts become deeper and more forceful. Finally his body goes taut, and he gasps out loud and thrusts in deeper still, ejaculating at last.

Wendy gets off the bus and walks over to the Arts Faculty building, going up a flight of steps to the English department. Standing in front of the bulletin board is her friend Gina, a tall woman in a long, tassel-hemmed black dress.

"Hi, Wendy," says Gina.

Wendy goes to her side and scans the bulletin board. "Anything interesting?"

"Talk put on by the Women's Group. *The Representation of Women in the Media: The Objectifying and Eroticizing Power of*

the Male Gaze. You been objectified and eroticized lately, Wendy?"

"Can't say I have."

"Chance it would be a fine thing, I say. How's Pete?"

"Not so hot, I'm afraid."

Gina turns to her, her mouth an O of concern. "Oh, dear. I'm sorry to hear that."

Wendy shrugs. "I don't know. We're just going through a bad patch, that's all. Something's getting to him and I don't know what it is."

"That's a bad sign."

"I love him, Gina. I'm a bit worried."

Gina glances round hurriedly. "Look, let's not talk here. Let's go into the common room."

The common room is spacious, with tables and chairs at one end and pigeonholes along one side. Wendy and Gina sit down next to each other in two large soft chairs.

"Let me get you a coffee," Gina says. "You need one. It's Brass Monkey weather out there."

"Thanks, Gina. I need cheering up."

When Gina comes back with the coffees, she says, leaning forward, "So, has he said anything?"

Wendy shakes her head. "Nothing at all. We've tried talking it through. Something's wrong."

"Something in the air?"

Wendy nods. As much as she's friendly with Gina, she's not yet ready to discuss her and Pete's sexual problems. "Something's getting him down."

"Being unemployed? Not knowing many people?"

"It could be. But he can make friends. He's got things to do, even if it's watching videos. I don't think that's all it is."

Their conversation subsides into silence. Wendy wonders momentarily whether she should discuss, after all, Pete's impotence with Gina. Not here, of course: somewhere where they can guarantee no one would overhear.

Gina leans forward again. "At the risk of depressing you further, Wendy, I suppose you heard about Jim Winterton?"

"I never really knew him. But it's appalling anyway." Wendy

knows he was a student who, a few days before, had fatally overdosed on heroin.

Gina nods. "I knew him a little. He was a misfit, really, was the impression I got. He couldn't cope with reality. Never grew up. Drugs were a prop, his fantasy, really. And in the end he OD'd."

"God, we're a bundle of laughs today, Gina," Wendy sighs. She picks up her bag and stands up. It's almost time for the seminar.

Pete lies naked on the bed, the woman beside him nuzzling his earlobe. He strokes her side absently; she lets him cup her breast. Although it's cold in the room, Pete doesn't notice. He is warm, fulfilled.

The woman moves away from his earlobe and runs her tongue down the line of his cheek, roughened by the first stubble. She moves on top of him, kneeling astride, then lowers her head to the point where he, feeling no inclination to move, can no longer see her.

He realizes with a shock when he feels her cold hand enclosing his penis, her fingers tickling his scrotum. And again he feels his penis stiffen. She runs her tongue along the seam and gently holds his glans in her mouth, soft as a berry, touching the rim with her tongue. Then she opens her mouth farther and takes in the entire length of his penis, entwining her tongue around the shaft. Pete closes his eyes, feeling the pressure build up inside him as he nears orgasm.

Shit, she'll do anything.

And then, *I wonder...?*

He thinks of one thing—something Wendy has always refused to do—her upbringing, perhaps, causing this uptightness. But it is certainly true that the idea repels her, each time he suggests it. Perhaps this woman is different.

And, as he thinks this, the woman sits up. His penis is suddenly cold, from her saliva, as she takes her mouth away. He opens his eyes, disappointment descending on him like dust.

The woman is kneeling on the bed, away from him. Her head is down on the coverlet, her arms enclosing her breasts. Her buttocks are in the air, facing him.

"You can read my fucking mind," he says. She turns her face to him and smiles. "You knew what I was thinking."

And the woman smiles again and reaches behind herself. With her fingers she parts her buttocks and presents him with the dark pink pouted mouth of her anus.

Pete laughs out loud, begins to tremble inside. His erection has begun to wilt, but now it comes to life again.

He mutters, "Lubricant. Need something slippery." He remembers that Wendy keeps a jar of Nivea cream in the cabinet above the washbasin. "Stay there," he says to the woman still kneeling on the bed.

He hurries over to the basin, his penis still erect, still urgent. He rummages through the contents of the cabinet. Hand cream, a Tampax box...but no Nivea cream. *Probably ran out. Shit!* For a moment he considers using toothpaste, but thinks not.

Of course. Last Tango. He hurries into the kitchen, past the woman on the bed. She follows him with her eyes. His erection is painful now. He opens the fridge, takes out a tub of margarine—the low-fat spread Wendy eats—and scoops out some with his fingers. Then he hurries back to the bed.

He works the margarine into the folds of the woman's anus, around the edges and into her rectum. He kneels upright behind her, puts his hands on her waist to steady himself, and enters her. He slips in easily, right up to the hilt of his penis. Her anus clasps him, hot and very tight; it pulls as he thrusts inside her. He climaxes quickly and withdraws stickily.

After she has gone, he showers to remove stale perspiration from himself. There's a sore spot on his right shoulder blade; he strains to look at it in the mirror. A scratch, that's all. The woman probably caught him there with her fingernail. He traces the raised pink line of the graze with his finger. It throbs under his touch, but no blood. He suddenly feels tired, as if his energy is draining slowly out of that scratch.

Wendy returns home. It's Pete's turn to cook dinner, so she sits on the bed, sifting through her mail. Then—discipline, nothing for it—she sits down at her desk and takes out her copy of Felix Holt. As Pete says little, she continues reading through

dinner, and, after washing up, takes the book to their bedroom to read by the light of a gooseneck lamp.

This is not a good sign, she thinks. *We've either got so used to each other's presence that we don't need to say much, or we're getting a serious communication problem.*

She concentrates on the book, shutting out the noise of the TV from the next room. She doesn't hear Pete come into the bedroom.

"Wendy...?"

She looks up at him.

"I think we'd better talk."

"Yes, I think we'd better."

"I know I've been down this last week..."

"Pete...I know there's a problem..."

"That I can't get it up? Keep it up, rather?" His voice sharpens, as if provoked by her schoolmarmish tone.

"Look, that doesn't matter. I don't hold that against you. Sex isn't that important to me, Pete. You are."

"But it can't be much fun for you, Wendy."

"It isn't *important*, Pete."

"It fucking well is!"

She starts. He's never spoken to her like that before.

"For God's sake, Pete. Calm down."

He turns, facing the wall, away from her. "You'll leave me—I know."

"Pete, there's more to us being together than just sex."

"I don't know what I'll do if you leave me."

"Don't be so stupid. Who said anything about me leaving you?"

He turns around again. His face is tight with pain.

"Pete, it *doesn't* matter. I don't care if we can't make love ever again. It's not that important to me. I really don't care."

He stares at her for a long time, then says, "You really know how to hurt a guy, Wendy."

"What have I said now?"

"Kick me when I'm down, that's right. I never knew you could be such a fucking bitch."

"Look." Wendy stands up, holds up her hand. "Let's stop

now. Something's getting to you. Let's not say another word before we say things we don't mean."

"Do you talk about this at university? With Gina?"

"Leave Gina out of this, please."

"Tell me."

"Of course I confide in her. She's a friend. I don't tell her everything, though."

"I'll thank you not to discuss our problems with someone else."

"Shut up, Pete!" Wendy snaps, her calmness finally gone. "Just keep her out of this! If you feel left out just because I have female friends and I talk about personal things with them, then, quite simply, that's your problem, matey."

"She's put you up to this, I know. You women are all the same."

"Now you're being paranoid. And sexist. She's got nothing against you."

Pete turns away and walks toward the door.

"Pete," Wendy says. "I'm worried. This isn't like you."

"Fuck off."

His words slice through her like a knife. The love she has had for this man—his kindness, consideration, his sense of humor—is flimsy in the face of this assault. He has changed irrevocably.

She puts her head in her hands and gives way to tears.

Unable to study any more, Wendy runs a bath, foamy and very hot. The temperature of the water sears her in a way she finds strangely comforting. As she dries herself with a towel, she sees something behind her in the steamed-up bathroom mirror. In her myopic sight, it appears as a pink blob: human size and shape, with a yellow top. It moves, and Wendy starts. She scrabbles for her glasses and as the room comes into focus she realizes there's nothing there.

Christ! Now it's me who's getting paranoid.

Pete has locked their bedroom door. She bangs on the door, calls his name, but there's no answer. *I'm not going to plead with him, the bastard.*

She barely sleeps that night, lying on the largest chair in the main room, a coat over her. Her mind is a whirl of thoughts.

The evening just gone, and the past. The man she has just argued with is a stranger to her. She doesn't recognize him. "You're all tense," the old Pete would have said. "Let me help." And he would have massaged her shoulders, his hands moving in wide arcs, his fingers at the widest sweep touching the tops of her breasts. The prelude to their lovemaking—not the be-all and end-all of their love, as she had said, but a good barometer of its health. And the first aspect to suffer. At times she valued his gentleness as their bodies moved together in drowsy union; at other times a combat stimulated her, the exhilaration of good rough sex. Mutual, shared—not something done by one to the other. And now a thing of the past. Tomorrow is Saturday. Gina'll put her up temporarily until she finds somewhere else to live.

Upstairs, the blonde woman is in Pete's bed. He spares her nothing, venting his anger with Wendy on her in brutal jackhammer thrusts, her legs spread wide. As she lies under him, her body jolted by him, her breathing deepening, her lips slide back from her mouth, baring her teeth.

Uptight bitch. His mind conjures up a picture of Wendy, illuminated by the shriveling glare of his anger. *Well, go fuck yourself. You're not going to put me down anymore.* He thrusts in again and again.

And then he sees himself, from underneath. His black hair, his eyes glinting diamond bright. His skin taut, his bones rigid with contained energy.

And then he is alone. His semen spurts out onto the sheets.

What the fuck...?

He stands up and almost faints, the same way he did once after giving blood, when he made the mistake of not eating properly beforehand. He sits back down again.

The woman stands at the end of the bed, naked. Smiling. She walks toward him.

"Who the fuck *are* you?" he says, suddenly afraid. "What do you want?"

She does not reply, but continues walking.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Gina says. "You look terrible."

"I feel terrible," Wendy says.

"Let me get you something to drink."

A cup of hot coffee in her hands, Wendy sits facing Gina. Having made the break with Pete, she should feel released. But she doesn't. She feels numb, as if burned, and a little sick. She's in yesterday's clothes, the bedroom door still locked against her. Her eyes are red from crying.

"I'm worried what he might do," she says. "He's gone completely mad."

"Well, you're welcome to stay here as long as you want, Wendy. We've got a spare room."

Wendy puts her hand on Gina's. "Thanks, Gina. But I've got to get my things first. I'm hoping he's reading my note about now."

"Do you want me to come...? Just in case?"

"I think it's best you didn't, Gina. With all due respect, you'll only make things worse."

Gina touches Wendy's elbow. "Be very careful, Wendy."

"I will."

Wendy takes the bus back and lets herself into the house. She walks up the stairs to the flat she shares with Pete and opens the door.

"Oh, my God!"

Inside, the room is in chaos. The chairs are turned upside down and flung against the wall; the music center is on its side, as is the television. The plates in the kitchen are all smashed, the cutlery spilled out over the floor.

The bedroom door is open; she tiptoes up to the door and looks inside.

Pete lies on the bed, naked. He is very pale, and his stubble shows up black against his skin. His penis is erect, purple, and engorged, and a mist has formed around it. In the mist she can see the form of a woman, naked, blonde. Pete's back arches; a gout of semen spurts into the air and is absorbed into the mist.

The woman turns and sees Wendy.

A smile appears on her face, and a small globe of the mist breaks away from the mass and forms in the air. In it, Wendy

sees scenes that appall her. Pete and this woman copulating in many positions; the woman performing fellatio on Pete; Pete sodomizing her.

The globe of mist dispels and re-forms. Now there's a man standing there. It solidifies totally so that the man looks completely real. He is naked. He has fair curly hair, blue eyes, very handsome features, a trim muscular physique. His penis is fully erect.

"Fuck off out of here!" Wendy orders.

Suddenly the man is gone and the woman leaps at her, her fingers extended, her long, sharp nails aimed straight at Wendy's eyes. Her glasses save her; they crack, but hold. The woman knocks Wendy over onto her back, kneels on her. She pushes Wendy's chin back with her palm, strong enough to prevent her moving it at all, exposing her neck. She lifts her other hand, nails outstretched. Wendy closes her eyes, steeling herself for the woman tearing out her throat: the pain, the spurting blood, hopefully a quick death.

"Leave her alone!" Pete shouts. "Get off her!"

The woman pauses, distracted. Suddenly Wendy brings her knee up into the woman's stomach. She jolts back, giving Wendy enough time to rock back on her pelvis and kick upward with the pointed heel of her shoe.

The woman shrieks. Blood and mist pulse out of the hole in her chest. Wendy shuffles backward, away from her, then scrambles to her feet and runs over to where Pete lies. She takes him in her arms, and he grasps her.

The woman lies on the floor, arms and legs twitching spastically. Wendy chokes back the urge to be sick as blood spills out of the woman, spreading out and bubbling as it soaks into the carpet. The mist is pouring out faster now, so much so that Wendy can't see the other side of the room. Now the woman is becoming blurry as the mist continues to spill out of her.

Wendy puts her arm about Pete's shoulder. "It's you she's got the hold over," she says. "She's not real. She's not a real woman." Pete begins to shiver. "Do it for me, Pete. Break the hold. Come on. Do it for me. I love you."

"Go to hell!" Pete says.

And the woman—or the thing, looking less and less human as the mist leaves her—has gone. A cloud of the mist hangs in the air but soon disperses.

“Has it gone?” says Pete.

“Yes, it’s gone.”

“Gone for good?”

“Yes.” *I hope so.* She feels very raw, as if her skin has been scraped, her nerve ends exposed.

Tears are spilling out of Pete’s eyes.

“Doesn’t matter, Pete. Doesn’t matter.” Wendy dabs at his eyes with her handkerchief.

“I’m cold.” His teeth are chattering.

Wendy puts her coat about his shoulders and holds him close to herself.



PARADISE DENIED

GREGORY L. NORRIS

The man on the roof with the placard proclaiming OLYMPUS IS ALIVE! was a statue unto himself.

That's the way he *should* have looked—perfect—like the gods.

I was drawn instantly to the ladder that held him separate above mere men. He was framed against the churning clouds, looking as though he commanded them—appearing every bit as all-powerful as Apollo, or Eros, or Achilles.

Perhaps more so...

With his flawless face and neat blond hair, his sculpted marble muscled frame and pale blue scrape that barely concealed the rigid column of his erection and full, swollen testicles, I was in rapture.

I traced the outline of his handsomeness with my eyes, and knew I wanted more. I ascended the ladder, my heart beating with the promise that, truly, paradise could be restored. The icon didn't move, didn't flinch when I sighed and felt the first caustic sting of tears in my eyes. He didn't protest, not even when I sank to my knees and reached beyond the Olympus sign he held in his burly arms, and caressed the swollen fullness of his virile testicles.

He didn't stop me—not until I gripped the magnificent column and placed my lips to the head. Instead of tasting cold stone and lifelessness, he filled my mouth with salt and sweat—and heat.

Then, without warning, he jerked back, tearing Olympus from my grasp.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, his tone much colder than the impassioned warmth of his skin.

I was taken aback, feeling as if I had been impaled. All not lost, I lowered to his perfect statuesque feet and kissed his hairy toes. "I came to worship," I said in a humble servant's voice.

"Stop that!" he commanded and, in one cruel shove, sent me sprawling onto the roof. He dropped the sign proclaiming Olympus's rebirth, and the musky taste of him on my tongue turned sour.

"Don't look at me. Don't touch me. Don't defile me with your heart."

Finally, when I did look, he had the most sardonic grin on his lips.

"You're not worthy." He picked up the sign and turned away.

And I, in my thoughts of fate mistrusting, felt the injured knot in my throat tighten. And augment. And change. Where pain and sorrow had flared to his rejection, a new sensation burned. But not as new as I would have thought. It was the anger of someone long scorned and ridiculed for not being as desirable as the gods. I bellowed, my hands slamming the roof. Even as the one who was so perfect looked up, the sky seemed to darken, and his intense gaze narrowed on me.

"How dare—"

I rushed him, tearing the placard from his strong arms proclaiming Olympus's second chance. My actions were so fast, as though carried by insane light, that he had no time to react. In one fluid motion, I pitched him from the roof. And when he hit the ground, he shattered like so much old stone. Bits of marble and alabaster lay strewn about the courtyard, and I collapsed, weeping.

Those three words stared at me accusingly from the fallen placard.

OLYMPUS IS ALIVE

I came here for the taste of semen.
I left with blood on my hands.



TO SUIT THE CRIME

JACK KETCHUM

"I think you've done a remarkable job," Dugas said. "Really."

Morgan leaned back on the red leather Chesterfield and lit a Camel, unfiltered, enjoying the first passage of smoke over his palate and up through his nose. It was wonderful to him that these old appetites were back in favor.

"Thank you," he said. "But it's hardly my doing. Not even that of the Court, entirely." He smiled. "We have all those Republican presidents to thank—Reagan, Bush, Quayle—"

"Not Quayle," Dugas said. "Dear God! Not Quayle."

Morgan laughed. "All right. Not Quayle. His man Beavers never did amount to much. But Dënninger, certainly. And Harpe. All the nominations were theirs."

"True."

"Obviously, we were abetted by history. The will of the people. It only remained for a single *Democratic* judge to fix *upon* the people and understand their will as it applied here. And we've always been best at that."

Dugas watched Morgan raise the cigarette to his lips and draw

smoke down into his lungs. It occurred to Dugas that the lips were too thin to be attractive in anyone other than a public figure—for some reason, the American people liked their politicians lipless—the hands too perfectly manicured and delicate. There was not an ounce of sensuality to the man, though, by reputation, he was no less debauched than anyone else in Washington.

No less than himself, perhaps.

Dugas thought, though, that had they not both been members of the same club—empty now, but for the two of them—he would never have wasted his time sitting here talking to Morgan. Despite Morgan's power, despite his undeniable accomplishments, and despite their political and career affiliations, there was something smug and distasteful about him. But here courtesy demanded his attention.

"It was a feeling I had maintained since law school," Morgan said. "Very simply, that the punishment should suit the crime. That something fundamental had been overlooked in the very structure of our adversarial system—that being the suffering of the victim. The *condition* of the victim at the time of his or her victimization."

Dugas watched him warm to his topic. Here we go, he thought. He owned a television set, after all. He'd heard this dozens of times. Still...

He nursed his single-malt whiskey and listened.

"You, as a lawyer, understand, I'm sure. Take a boy, for instance, struck down by a drunken driver. The boy is in the prime of his life, struck unexpectedly. One moment he's alive, perhaps happy—the next he's dead. Is it wise and correct to sentence the driver to a given number of years in prison, to allow him the luxury of counting the days toward his release from prison, feed him, clothe him, allow him time in the yard for exercise and time in the dayroom for television, and then, finally, release him? When, over the intervening years, the bars have not disappeared, the liquor stores have not disappeared? He can even apply for a driver's license again!"

He doesn't like me, Morgan thought. But he's reasonably attentive. That will do.

He went on. He had a point to make here, so that Dugas would thoroughly understand what followed.

"Many years ago, when I was still on the state court, I had a case I will never forget. A man had walked in to a college dormitory, shot the aged housemother in the forehead with a .45-caliber Smith and Wesson fitted with a silencer, and then stalked upstairs and picked a room at random. Inside were two students—young women, very pretty. The man forced them to strip at gunpoint, then forced one of the girls to tie the other to the bed and gag her. Then he tied and gagged the second girl, pushed her down on the same bed—and forced her roommate to watch while he *ate her friend alive*.

"He began, I believe, with her buttocks.

"The law being what it was back then, the usual jury of his peers sentenced him to life imprisonment in a state facility for the criminally insane. Of course, he should have died immediately."

Morgan stubbed out his cigarette.

"Died horribly."

"Excuse me, gentlemen."

It was the waiter, Woolbourne, carrying a tray and picking up Morgan's empty wineglass.

"Will you be wanting another? The workmen, I'm afraid..."

Impertinent bastard, Dugas thought. Woolbourne was addressing them both, but looking only at Morgan—as though he, Dugas, didn't matter.

Dugas glanced toward the workmen, two large muscular types, laying down a plastic tarp across the far corner of the library. Apparently renovations were in order, though he couldn't see the need of any.

"What are they doing, Woolbourne?" Dugas asked.

"The wallpaper, I believe, sir. They're replacing a section." The man still didn't look at him. Merely picked up his glass, which was not even quite empty.

He'd have liked to smash that glass against Woolbourne's well-bred patrician face.

A goddamn waiter, for God's sake.

"Another," Dugas said. "One more."

"Yes," said Morgan. "One more would be fine."

"Very good, gentlemen."

Dugas lit a Camel and ran his gaze over the gold and red fleur-de-lis wallpaper near the window. Perhaps the damaged section lay behind the heavy Utrecht velvet curtains.

Morgan sighed.

"It changed my life, that case. From that point on I knew what I wanted to do—what *needed* to be done. And, thank god, times have come exactly 'round to that."

"Yes."

The toady in Dugas could easily have said, "Yes, and *you've* brought them 'round to that." Careerwise it was the intelligent thing to do. It would even have been true. But shoptalk with this old magistrate was boring him. His career was fine as it stood. He wasn't even sure he cared about a career anymore. He had other interests. He said nothing.

Insolent or not, at least Woolbourne was efficient. He brought their drinks. Sherry for Morgan, another single-malt for Dugas. Morgan raised his glass.

"To the law," he said smiling.

"To the law."

They touched glasses. Then the old bird was off again.

"I've had a case culminate just recently," he said. "An interesting one, actually. An excellent problem in...appropriateness. The accused was a young adoptive mother who had murdered her three-and-a-half-year-old son, whom she had adopted when he was only one year old. Somehow her systematic abuse of the child had gotten by the welfare people for over two years."

"It happens."

"Yes, unfortunately it does. Her explanation was that he had fallen down a flight of stairs. Said he was generally a clumsy child. But that was patently false. For one thing, some of the bruises were months old. For another, there were burn marks all over him."

He held up a cigarette.

"These, no doubt. There was evidence of severe malnutrition. Neighbors reported that she had, on at least one occasion, fed the child his own feces. Finally, the rectal passage was severely scarred and lacerated and distended abnormally.

"As usual, we accepted her explanation and then investigated, charged her, and convicted her of murder. Her husband, by the way, was also charged and convicted—of negligent homicide. We had no evidence he'd ever touched the boy. And probably he hadn't. But he'd watched.

"For two years, the woman was burned, beaten, neglected, starved, upon occasion fed her own bodily wastes, and abused with the broomstick from her own home—I believe they found it in the basement—while the husband, of course, was forced to watch. I'm told he's quite insane now, by the way.

"Then, only last week, she was pushed down the stairs. She died, as did the child, of a broken neck. We were really quite pleased with it. Rarely, in my experience, has a punishment fit the crime so closely. Nearly a duplication of it."

Dugas smiled. "Ah," he said. "But the boy was just a child. An innocent, so to speak. What about that?"

Morgan shrugged. "After a few months or so of deprivation and abuse, so was the woman, for all practical purposes."

Dugas thought about it, then nodded.

"Elegant," he said. "Quite elegant."

"We thought so," Morgan said. "The only thing missing was possibly some of the element of surprise."

"Surprise?"

The workmen by the window had unfolded their plastic tarp and were taking a break, standing there smoking, occasionally glancing in their direction. Dugas thought it typical of the lower classes these days. From secretaries to waiters to craftsmen.

"Of course," said Morgan. "Go back to our boy on the bike, run down by a drunken driver. Well, he's *surprised*, isn't he? Shocked! One moment he's fine, riding along, and the very next moment is filled with some *sudden* blinding agony. Or the two young girls I mentioned, sitting in their dormitory, chatting over boyfriends or schoolmates or family or whatnot, when, suddenly, life becomes an utter horror, a nightmare, all pain and death and helplessness. Unthinkable. Unimaginable. And quite surprising."

Morgan saw he had Dugas's full attention now. Better late than never.

He sipped his sherry.

"The element of surprise. It's the entire reason we investigate, try, and sentence completely out of the public eye these days. Why those early experiments in televised and print-medium reporting, and even with juries and open courtrooms, are over. Because most, if not all, violent crimes definitely include that element. The sudden shock. So, to be fair to the victim, to come as closely as possible to the *experience* of the victim, any punishment which hopes to suit the nature of the crime must come as a shock to its perpetrator, as it did to his or her victim at the time.

"And here this last case, *on the surface*, falls slightly short of our ideal. Since her punishment lasted over such an extended time—two years—one must assume that this woman realized, at some point, how it all would end. But look deeper, and it's really not so far off the mark. Her initial arrest surprises her. The nature of her punishment—so closely mirroring her adopted son's—*that* must have surprised her, and on an absolutely fundamental level. That it can *hurt*, for instance, to be forced to eat your own shit."

Morgan's use of the word "shit" was enough surprise for Dugas that he choked on his single-malt whiskey.

"Sorry," Morgan said. And then went on.

"Then look at the end. Isn't death *always* something of a surprise? Doesn't it always come as something of a shock? Maybe not the how—but certainly the when? Heart patients, cancer patients, even patients in daily, agonizing pain who *pray* for death, must finally be somewhat surprised when it actually comes. Even if it comes...as relief.

"And who is to say that even a three-and-a-half-year-old cannot realize his own mortality, his growing frailty, his own approaching death?"

He settled back slowly and finished his wine.

"Your mirror may have been a very good one, then," said Dugas.

"Yes," said Morgan, smiling. "I think we've all been doing our jobs quite adequately. Even on that one."

My God! You *are* a smug sonofabitch, Dugas thought.

"Even on you." Morgan stood up, straightening his dinner jacket.

Dugas saw that it was a signal. The two burly workmen approached from the corner of the room and stood close by. Woolbourne appeared in the mahogany-paneled doorway, blocking his exit.

"Emil Dugas," said Morgan. "You stand accused, tried, and convicted by this Court of the murder of Lynette Janice Hoffman, aged twenty-three years, your onetime lover and onetime secretary, on January 23 of the year 2021, one year, one month, and three days previous. Your sentence to be carried out immediately, and your punishment to suit the crime."

Dugas's brain reeled. It was impossible. *Literally* impossible. All this talk. All this hypocrisy. All this crap about punishment to "suit the crime," this tedious prefatory lecture, when in fact they were going to kill him in some fucking phony novel way and that was all they could possibly do. Because the rest was impossible.

He almost laughed. Instead he exploded.

"You're a fool, Morgan! A buffoon! Or a goddamn lying hypocrite. Or all three. How are you going to make this punishment 'suit the crime?' You know damn well you can't *begin* to. If you know what I did to that girl, then you must know *how* I did it. It is *not* something you can mirror. So what am I going to get here? Some *approximation*?"

He spat out the word in disgust.

Morgan smiled. Dugas still didn't understand. Well, he expected that he wouldn't.

He nodded to the workmen. They took Dugas's arms and led him to the plastic drop cloth. Dugas struggled, but it was like struggling with someone three times as strong as he was and three times his size. Which, he guessed, these two were. *Exactly as he'd been three times as strong and nearly three times as heavy as Lynette, when he'd...*

And now he *was* laughing, hysterically, as they stripped off his clothes. Laughter mixed with fury.

"You can't do it!" he screamed. "You can't fucking do it because I've got no *hole* there! You see? No fucking *orifice*, you dumb goddamn asshole! She *saw* me when I did it to her, do you

understand that? You know what that means? You see the goddamn difference? To see the face of your murderer? To see his *pleasure*? What are you going to do, stick it up my ass, you goddamn hypocrite? You fucking *loser*! You can't come close! You can't even *begin* to know what I made that little bitch suffer! Right up to the moment I decided to wring her fucking neck! That entire goddamn time she was looking right at me, right into my *face*!"

"We understand that," Morgan said. "Perfectly."

He nodded again and one of the workmen drew an object out of his clean white overalls. To Dugas it looked like a combination garden trowel and apple corer. Made of surgical steel. With a two-inch diameter. And a sharp serrated edge.

When the man applied it to his groin, sank it deep, and twisted, then withdrew, Dugas screamed and screamed.

"Will *my* face do?" Woolbourne asked politely.

Through blinding pain, Dugas watched the waiter's trousers fall down around his ankles.

Almost as Dugas's own had been, Woolbourne's was quite an erection.

CITY IN THE TORRID WASTE

T. WINTER-DAMON

The air heat shimmered. The persistent wind moaned longingly. Spiraling dust clouds and fragile pinnacles of metal oxide salts, pigmented in a harsh, dusky rainbow taunting with empty promise, surrounded the smoky bronze, UV-screening bubble-dome that crouched above the City in the Torrid Waste. Ghosts of long-dead millions howled outside its gates.

Once, the festering pit in the alkaline earth nearby had disgorged a wealth of varied ores, copper its primary vein. But that was before payloads dwindled and the peons of the Ascian latitudes slaved it forth far cheaper. Before the acid rains swept westward. Before the Hole in the Sky ripped wide. The once-beautiful, fertile flesh of Mother Earth ravished, defiled, and corrupted. *Made barren.*

The grass-green sheers billowed and swirled in the sweet-scented gusts of synth-breeze. The air was crisp, cool, and tinged with a whisper of magnolia blossoms and jasmine, a deft mingling accomplished by the dome's air-conditioning plant. The total power consumption of the city must graph out into stratos-

pheric levels of mega-kilowattage, but the enormous pull, even at the summer's ferocious peak temps, never caused a blackout or brownout. The solar collectors outside the dome, concealed beyond the nearest ridge line, swallowed the sun's fierce rays, collecting, storing, and assimilating the almost-limitless energy. They were also virtually indestructible, built to last as long as the dream of humankind survived, and longer....

But the hidden machinations of tech-support were the farthest thing from this dark-maned nymph's far darker mind.

Her long, delicate fingers caressed the gentle slope of shoulder, raising gooseflesh at the electricity of awakened desire. Her fingers trailed the sensuous curve of spine, the ripe, melonlike swell of lushly rounded buttocks, massaging the so-sensitive flesh with feather-tingling strokes. The taffy-haired girl giggled musically in Morrigan's ear, letting her warm pink tongue flicker into the shell-like orifice, seeking to return measure for measure every exquisite eternal moment of pleasure-torment she received. "Oooooohhhh," she cooed in ecstasy, "yes, yes, touch me *there*—" as Morrigan's other hand splayed out, trailing down the soft taper of the girl's lower belly, her fingers grasping the stiff penis jutting from her groin, encircling the thick shaft, stroking and toying with its rigidity. The girl moaned, wriggling her hips in desire. "And *there*," she mewled, as the raven-haired woman cupped the swollen sac of her testicles, squeezing them ever so gently, savoring the wicked sensations as egglike glands rolled about within the hairy, wrinkled flesh of her scrotum. "Ohhh, yes, and *there*!" the girl groaned, as Morrigan explored lower, pushing her finger into the wet heat of the girl's sex....

The glistening mask of jet-black feathers betrayed no hint of emotion, save for the terrible hunger betrayed in the slits of the eyeholes—emeralds that sparkled with a cold, unquenchable fire. The dark vision of the Raven's mask, with its cruel beak poised above her, only served to whet the taffy-haired girl's excitement. Her own elaborate mask of feathers was a bizarrerie of bobbing plumes and downy tufts the same color as her hair, but with bold accents of black and crimson.

Morrigan lowered her sleek body onto the girl's lap, impaling herself on the upthrust phallus....

They were both bathed in sweet, trickling perspiration, reeking of pleasure-pheromones, as were the forest-green sheets that crumpled beneath them. Two roses and a thorn all intertwined.

"When will you next bleed?" Morrigan whispered in eager query. "I desire the bright poppy blossoms of your flux." Her teeth glittered whitely in the luring darkness of her mouth-slit.

"The delights of Yang. *And* Yin. These I *can* provide." The girl answered. "But what you desire—this I cannot give, I regret. My flow, never more than a pain-ripe bud, withered by my late teens to an echo of misery, by my majority was but a desiccated memory...."

"If all you can offer me, my dear, is the pleasure of your flesh and soul, then I regret..."

Framed by heavy drapes of rich purple velvet, the filmy fabric billowed like clouds of lilac-tintured smoke. Now the sweet breath of unnatural breeze was scented of hyacinths, mountain laurel, and Persian lilac. Morrigan turned her Raven-masked face to stare into the eyes of her newest innamorata. The eyes behind the mask were vivid violet. The mask was an extravagant fantasy of rare feather tufts tinted in a rich palette of purple hues, stranded with ropes of tiny seed pearls and sparkling with faceted dangles of amethyst crystal. Her mouth was bare, lips glossed in matching pigments. Even the short spikes of her hair were dyed a coordinating shade.

Their lips joined, drinking deeply of one another's passion.

Their lips parted. Slid down necks, trailing hot kisses.

Their lips savored the puckered berry-fruit of firm, luscious breasts. So many tasty berries. Suckling. Then slithered lower, leaving snail-trails of glistening saliva in their wake. They explored the warm, dark dimples of navels with their tongues. Then worked lower, into the soft tangle of pubic thickets...

The sheets were soaked with their perspiration and the sweet muskiness of their mingled nectar. Both were gasping softly, basking in the bliss of passion's ebb tide.

"When will you next bleed?" Morrigan whispered anxiously. "I desire the bright hibiscus blossoms of your flux." Again, her teeth glittered whitely in the luring darkness of her mouth-slit,

forming some perverse equation of desire unfathomable to those who do not comprehend the secrets of the shadows.

"I would gladly please you, darling Morrigan, but, alas, as so many now do, I entered my menopause quite early, just before my thirtieth birthday. Some claim it is a price we pay for maintaining a strict, total gynarchy. You are two years too late, I fear...."

The girl was so blonde that her hair sparkled like filaments of purest gold. She was sleek and voluptuously formed, with lush, cantaloupe-sized breasts, so firm and succulent. She was clad all in butter-soft black leather, with a lace-up bustier, sleek tapered pants, tall spike-heeled boots, and a true relic: an ancient cycle jacket—truly a museum piece.... But the girl could obviously afford it. She had it all. Well-turned. And well-heeled.

Oh, yes, and a Nahuatlán jaguar mask of exquisitely painted feathers.

Quite fetching, really.

They had met, as usual, at the Café Harry Zero (its namesake the legendary last-gasp neo-surrealist genius), the au courant place for the avant garde of the City in the Torrid Waste, hang-out for painters, Virtual-artists, psych-montagists, Chaos-tappers, poets, pagans, perverts, and all the hippest of hip dilettantes and cognoscenti.

The room—their trysting place—was a study in dark passion. A place to release the *bête noire* in all its raging, lustful fury.

An Asylum of Desire.

No doors.

No windows.

The interior of the massive trapezoid all done in tufted black leather with silver concho-studs. Alight with a myriad of firefly-flickering red candles, dripping, slowly dripping rivulets of blood-red wax....

At room center, a floor-to-ceiling turnstile of ebony wood and stainless-steel hooks, displaying an atrocity exhibit of whips and chains and manacles and leather masks and body corsets.

Oh, yes!

Tantric to the max.

They peeled.

They squealed.

In one another's arms, they reeled.

The blonde delighted in Morrigan's six champagne-cup-sized breasts.

Morrigan found the blonde's lace-up back a deliciously wicked novelty. And the mutant pleasure-folds its unfettered cincture soon revealed. She'd squandered a fortune on the DNA-surgeons and graft-mod-clinicians. She was deep into body modification. Very deep. Both scrupulously shaved armpits sported synth-vulvas, exquisitely pink and alluring. The standard nipple-rings. Her belly, as was the current fashion, was double-sexed, brandishing a quite functional twelve-inch phallus and, beneath it, a golden-mossed mons, tricked out with a series of silver rings piercing her outer labia, laced with a whip-thin thong of night-black leather. Simply begging to be untied...

She had everything money could buy.

Everything the scalpel and hormones and gene-splice could offer.

She and Morrigan pushed one another beyond the thresholds of pain and pleasure. Again. And again. And again.

Oh, she was built for pleasure.

But, when it came to the crucial question.

No. She couldn't bleed.

In desperation, Morrigan sought the services of the electronic bulletin board. Booting up her PC. Posting a WANTED in the PERSONALS.

How mundane!

How déclassé!

But it expanded her network. The bonephone in her skull soon buzzed with fresh contacts reaching out to touch her neural nexus, sublim stims the next-best thing to being there....

But what a mess of hags and skags her urgent plea unleashed!

They seemed like outcasts from Boilsuckers Anonymous, most surely the mutant spawn of rad-burned genes. As there were *no* men allowed within the City, once long-ago known as "Too Tough to Die," all propagation was clinical. Sex was pure plea-

sure, love and tenderness so refined (with a few S&M-fixed exceptions) that only one woman could bring another such exquisite, transcendent ecstasy. Stray males from New Babylon were captured by the valiant War Mays, tormented and abused, then penned in the subterranean laserbore tunnels just beyond the dome, and milked of their venom as one might milk a viper. Then exterminated. Recent graft technology allowed the taking of organs—the addition of a stalwart, functional penis to milady's anatomy did away with the need for those outmoded and cumbersome dildos and vibrators, once a staple of interfemale congress. But, regrettably, once in a while the unfortunate occurred, and a tainted male was taken for deseeding. One with radiation-twisted DNA structures....

Morrigan could scarcely believe there could be so many pathetic creatures. And all seemed *eager* to couple with her. Eager to offer her the crimson blossoms of their flux. Horrid bat-winged grotesques. Blubbery travesties with porcine faces. Hairy, crook-shanked things like she-goats. Walking skeletons, with bones barely encased by pallid, taut-stretched skin. Flopping, flabby dugs hanging to their navels. Drooping, flaccid buttocks. And the stinking wounds between their legs! Flesh covered by festering sores and scabrous crusts and ringworm and inflamed clusters of pus-engorged pimples... *Uuuuagghhhhh!* How could even another of their blighted kind join in amorous pursuit with such nightmarish horrors?

How could she ever sate her cravings with beasts such as these?

Very near admitting defeat, Morrigan followed the directions she'd been given, taking a floater into the City's most exclusive section. The triangular pad skimmed gracefully along, several inches above the pavement, homing on the coordinate data she had punched into the locator control mounted in the armrests of the body-conforming recliner.

When she buzzed up the sec system at the luxurious compound, the soft, sensuous voice of the computer begged her indulgence while it sought access clearance. The wait was a matter of mere seconds. The twin semicircles of the moon gate in the

high wall swung open of its own accord, and the sec's synth-voice bade her welcome.

She entered a lush tropical garden, following a flagstone path between the broad leaves of banana trees and split-leaf philodendrons. Morrigan soon found herself in an open gladelike area, beautifully landscaped with surrounding stone tiers planted with a wide variety of succulents and other ground covers, interspersed with a seemingly limitless variety of bizarre cacti sprouting jutting shafts, near-geometric pads, arms, and assorted outthrusters, all bristling with vicious needles.

In the center of the glade was a zero-G bubble, its machinery and generators no doubt secreted beneath the flagstone patio on which it rested. Morrigan could see two naked forms, twisting, twining, and writhing pleasurably in a slow pinwheel spin of shapely legs, arms, and assorted curves, silver-blond and auburn tresses whipping about in slo-mo spin. The air was filled with musical giggles, warm and melodious and crystalline, accompanied by moaning gasps and *oohs* and *ahhs* of passionate abandon....

When the pair at last slowed their spin and floated gently to the ground, they collapsed at first into a tangle of intertwined limbs. When they untangled, the former kaleidoscope of girlflesh resolved itself into two *very* attractive individuals of quite similar physical appearance, though both, of course, were fashionably masked. Neither seemed embarrassed nor concerned by their total nakedness.

"You're Morrigan?" the redhead questioned.

"Yes."

"I'm Badb," the redhead said.

"And I'm Fea," the blonde said. "If you haven't already guessed, we're sisters." Her chin was upturned slightly, and her lips were formed in a peevish pout even as she spoke.

"Don't mind *her*, she's such a *bitch*! But we're very close," Badb added, as if Morrigan needed that explanation.

The redhead sported an owl mask, in various tones and shades of rust and brown with accents of ocher and burnt sienna and rich umber.

Her sister wore an owl mask, also. But hers was snowy white,

blending with the flow of her tresses, making it quite difficult to tell exactly where the hair ended and the feathers of the mask began.

Morrigan's breath came hard and trembly. Her pulse elevated, drumming a tattoo of lust in her ears, her temples, and her sleek throat. Her loins tingled quite naughtily, and she felt all hot and moist and quivery down there, at the sight presented by the two lusciously nude sisters.

They soon "coaxed" Morrigan into disrobing.

They did a little mixing. These girls were good hosts.

When at last all three collapsed in blissful languor, the Raven-masked Morrigan "popped the question" to her two newfound lovers: "I suppose this is a futile question but," Morrigan whispered with a touch of trepidation, "*when will you next bleed?* I long for the bright crimson rose blossoms of your flux." Yet again, her teeth glittered whitely in the luring darkness of her mouth-slit.

"Well, a rather *kinky* request, I'd say," Badb giggled. "But you are certainly in luck, My Dear Ms. M. Would you care to spend the night with us? You see, I am due tomorrow, or the next day, at the latest—"

"And my period is due two days hence," Fea said. "We suffer together...."

The gossamer fabric billowed between drapes whose dark bulk suggested ancient standing stones. The rumpled satin sheets and coverlets of the bed were rippling surfaces of a chill, deep pool; or a floe of glistening obsidian, mirroring the night sky, appearing velvet-soft, yet deceptively razor-edged.... All black as the glossy feathers of the Raven's mask, poised above this sensuous interplay of light and shadows. Curves of snow-white flesh bared to her dark cravings in a tableau of illusion, precise in its every detail.

The dark eyeholes of the midnight-black mask burned fiercely. Morrigan's teeth glittered white, whiter than clean-stripped bone. Her tongue darted out, licking her lips, savoring the feral muskiness, the tang of salt and copper....

Her lips were brilliant red. Red as poppy blossoms. Red as

hibiscus blossoms. Red as roses. Red with dripping effluvial rubies of poison-rich blood....

Her knowledge encompassed the jargon term by which the ancient headshrinkers would have neatly pigeonholed her own desire: hematophilia. The clinical delineation for those possessed by the obsessive/compulsive fixation to indulge in bloodsucking. Or, more specifically, hematomenophilia.

But those were the Old Sciences. Male-dominated sciences. The same sciences that had raped and pillaged the Earth Mother through their self-serving greed, prejudice, and shortsightedness. Slaves. So ludicrously proud of their own intellect. Mindlessly serving their true masters. *Lucifer. Mammon. And Baal Phegor* (already long-corrupted to *Belphegor*).

Some would term her desire simply a perverse form of vampirism.

But Morrigan knew more. Far more. Morrigan was an *adept*.

Morrigan knew herself to be a *savior*. A martyr, yes. With the roots of her act of absolution traceable to ancient Knowledge of Blood, the legend of the Fisher King (a male-perverted interpretation of a far-older matriarchal parable), the menstrual cycles of the moon, and the Celtic ritual of sin eating.... But even a martyr can temper the degree of her self-sacrifice, perhaps even temper it with *pleasure*.

Love can heal all wounds.

Through love, self-sacrificing, the Earth Mother could be healed. The poisons purified. The soil and seas and air made whole.

So Morrigan had at last found the blossoms of the lunar cycle she had sought for. And, able to indulge her need and be fulfilled twice over, she wasted no time moving in with the two sisters. And one may suppose they all lived and loved quite happily ever after, savoring (so to speak) their *days of wine and roses*.

At least until they reached that "midlife crisis." But I quite suppose that is a story that will be told later.



LUCK OF THE DRAW

JACI MARSH

Sweating, Rake shuffled the cards: once, twice, three times, then slaid them down on the cheap pine table. He stared at them. He'd made them himself: each design, front and back, intricately drawn, then painted with water-based oils, a seeming contradiction in terms but an amazing new product by Grumbacher. He ran his finger over the lacquered surface of the top card. The backs all had the same design; well, almost the same. Since they were hand done, each had its own personality flaws. But the faces...

Rake picked up the deck and shuffled it again: once, twice, three times. Three times is a charm. He placed his hand over the deck and, in a motion a magician would make, fanned them out across the tabletop. In anticipation, his hand went to his crotch and, finding the head of his prick, massaged it through the worn cloth of his pants with thumb and forefinger.

Three evenings ago, he had randomly chosen the ménage à trois card. What a night that had been. The woman's name was Nancy; the man's, Benny. Compared to himself, Benny had a much smaller dick, but Benny had one thing going for him: it

never got soft. Nancy had small, lemon-sized tits and ample hips, with asscheeks that, when she bent over, opened up like two halves of a globe exposing the inner molten core of its being. Her cunt had the heady aroma of a cross between mutton and orange roughly. They were startled when Rake popped into their fuck session, out of thin air. Startled but not fearful. Both of them had been snorting coke and probably wouldn't have been surprised if a bull elephant with a twenty-four-inch hard-on had come waltzing in. So, for all practical purposes, this invasion was consensual. Most of the time it wasn't.

Nancy, it turned out, loved to take on two men at a time. Soon after Rake's appearance, she had Benny stretched out on the king-sized bed with her mouth full of his six-incher. If the sucking sounds weren't enough to turn Rake on—she was a noisy little bitch—the sight of her parted ass, puckered eye up, bald slug-lipped slit below, had Rake at full nine-and-a-half inch mast. Rake had always been well hung, at least since age twelve when he'd whacked off for the first time. But before Rake put his meat into Nancy, he put his nose next to her openings, inhaling the sultry aroma of a woman in rut. He tongued her from tailbone to clit, lingering at her anus, then her cunthole, her peehole....

There was a total of seven holes: three mouths, three assholes, and one cunt, and they fucked and sucked in every possible position and combination.

Rake shook himself out of his daydream. With the cards, and the dark invocation he'd attached to them, the exception was superior to the rule: the real thing better than the fantasy.

Well, most of the time. A month ago he'd drawn the "rape" card. Definitely non-consensual there, except for one occasion where the bitch actually loved it and begged for more. Rake had tried everything to humiliate the little slit, but she loved it all.

Shit happens.

Then, two nights ago he'd drawn the "rape" card again. This time it had been the way he'd fantasized it. Well, almost. He'd popped in, of all places, in her bathroom while she was soaking in a Jacuzzi-sized tub. Eliminated the thrill of tearing

off her clothes. But then again, that's what made it interesting. Never the same scenario. But he *loved* to tear their clothes off.

At any rate, she'd resorted to the typical screaming and criss-crossing of the arms over the tits. Didn't do much good. She had watermelons. *Karpoozies*, as they called them in Greece. And they were wet. And soapy.

"I'm here to fuck you," Rake had said as he unzipped his pants and pulled out his cock to show her his weapon.

She stood up, moving her hand down to hide her pubic area, leaving the other to try, unsuccessfully, to cover her breasts, and backed into the corner of the tub where it met the wall. It was a silly move. Why do women do that? She lost her balance and fell plop on her ass on the small porcelain seating area. Her waist and ass were tiny for the size of her ninnies. She had raven hair that hung to her tailbone and she pulled it to the front of her body to help hide herself. Doing so she exposed her nipples. They were dark brown and huge; larger than any he'd ever seen, like triple-sized baby-bottle nipples.

Rake preferred pink ones that stuck out like miniature penises. Oh, well.

He quickly disrobed and moved toward her.

Her scream had finally lodged in her throat, the sound trapped by her fear. Rake smiled. "Ever been fucked by one this big?" he said, fist around his cock, waving it at her.

He grabbed her by her long, black, silky hair and pulled her to him, turned her around, took her from behind. Later, on the floor, he had her again. Then, dumped over the toilet, he'd sodomized her anus. Had used her mouth....

She'd whispered a curse to him. Not a four-letter-word curse, but a "curse" curse. A black curse.

He laughed. And kept laughing....

Until the next morning, when he found the card in his shirt pocket. The back was the same design as his "special" deck, but the front—the front was not his design, not his painting, not his...fantasy.

Death!

It was the death card: female skeleton in a black cloak and

hood, face hidden inside the cowl, knife in raised hand, blood red sky behind, at her feet a man on the ground—dead...

Rake had torn it into dozens of pieces and flushed it down the toilet. Shaken, he had taken the next night—last night—off. Nothing like this had happened before. Even tonight, when he took his deck of cards out of the dresser drawer, he was sweating like a pig. He held them in his hands a long time before turning them face up and shuffling through them.

And there it was...again!

"Shit!" Once again he tore it into tiny bits and, this time, opened his third-storey window and flung the pieces of paper into the cool evening breeze. Shaking, he slammed the window shut and backed into the kitchen, leaning the back of his head against the refrigerator. He needed a drink. All he had was cheap beer. He drank three of them, guzzling them like a kid doing shooters. It seemed to calm him down.

Hallucinating. He had to be hallucinating. Yeah. That was it. Fucking seeing things. He belched and wiped the spittle away with his sleeve. Goddamn bitch. He felt like searching through the deck for the rape card. See if he could get that big-nippled cunt just one more time.... But it didn't work that way, and he knew it. It had to be the luck of the draw or it didn't work. He knew. He had tried it the other way.

Bitch! Curses.... Bullshit was what it was. Bullshit.

Rake gathered up the cards from where he had thrown them on the bed and laid them on the table. For a long time, he just stood there, glaring at them.

Bullshit was what it was.

Sooner or later he'd draw the card and maybe, just maybe, if he fantasized hard enough, concentrated hard enough, he'd get her again. And the next time....

He found himself shuffling the cards: once, twice, three times. He spread them out on the table.

Bullshit was what it was.

His finger touched one of the cards. He leaned down, examined the back minutely. Was it his work? His design? He hesitated. It didn't feel right.

Bullshit was what it was.

He moved three cards to the right and pulled one out of the spread. Again, he examined the back. No doubt. This one was his work. His design. His masterpiece.

Rake laughed out loud and turned over the card.

Death!

"Motherfucker!" He staggered backward, throwing the card from him. It fluttered to the floor, face-up. "Motherfucker!" he repeated, gasping for breath. "I'll burn the motherfucker," he said to himself. "Burn the motherfucker."

He didn't smoke. Raced to find matches. Kept them only to light candles. Found a half-used box in a kitchen drawer. Retrieved the card from the floor. Lit a match.

Burned the motherfucker.

Bullshit was all it was!

The thought seemed a joke. He didn't laugh.

He found the card again on his pillow and knew...knew he couldn't go to sleep or he'd die. Bitch! Of all the women he could have dropped in on to rape, it had to be some kinda witch. Luck of the fucking draw. Shit! He drank coffee. Tea. Caffeinated cola.

Day one he was wandering the three small rooms of his apartment. By day two he was wandering the halls outside. By day three, he was wandering the streets. It was autumn. Cool but not yet cold. He wished for the cold. To keep him awake. Then, in his almost-catatonic state, he had a rational thought. An idea. What if he shuffled the deck and drew another fantasy. It would supersede the death card. *Yes, that was it*, he thought. That would work.

Rake found his way back to his apartment building. Staggered up the stairs. Unlocked the door. Went to the pine table. Shuffled the deck: once, twice, three times. His thoughts were fading in and out. He could hardly keep his eyes open. This was his last chance.

He drew a card.

Death!

A scream caught in his throat, just as the raven-haired woman's scream had caught in hers. Rake staggered backward and caught his heel on something unseen.

Falling.

Head cracking against the door jamb.

Darkness.

He lay on an altar, bound, face-up. They were all around him. Hooded. Faces he didn't recognize. Except for one.

She peered down at him, eyes laced with hate.

Can't be happening.

Bullshit was what it was.

Arms went into the air. Fists closed around knives. They said nothing. They didn't have to.

Why did he have to drop in on *her*? Why had he even selected *that* card? He knew the answer. There was just no luck for Rake Edwards with that draw—

It was his last thought.

THE SIXTH POSITION

CARO SOLES

"I think I'm getting the hang of this." Luc grinned at his companion across the winking crystal and silver, the blazing white of the linen tablecloth, the spice-scented flowers. He had just signed another autograph on a page torn from a young woman's date book. "Dance freaks. I love them!"

"You like to be admired?" Conor raised a dark eyebrow.

"To be appreciated, I think."

"I can offer you more than any of them."

"I wouldn't be surprised." Luc looked at Conor in frank admiration. Then he grinned again, his brown eyes bright with amusement. "Let's see. You have looks, charm, sophistication. Money, too, I guess. But then, lots of people do. What else can you offer?"

"Immortality."

Luc laughed, a rich, full laugh. "Why would I want that? I'm not Faust."

"He wanted youth," Conor pointed out.

"And look what happened to him!" Luc popped a shrimp into his luscious mouth. "Anyway, I've got youth."

"For the moment."

The smile faded from Luc's beautiful face. "That's not playing fair. Have you any idea how much a dancer worries about time? Age? We spend our whole lives in front of mirrors. Every month, every year, we worry that the muscles are less elastic, the bones more brittle, knowing our bodies will ultimately betray us."

"For you, I could do something about that."

"I wish!"

Conor's expression didn't change. His dark eyes burned with an intensity that made Luc draw back slightly, his smile uncertain.

"You sure have a unique approach to a first date," Luc remarked, regaining a little of his poise. "After all, you hardly know me."

"I know you better than you realize," Conor said. His long fingers caressed the half-empty glass of red wine, making the crystal sing. "Why don't you let me show you how much I know?"

Luc pursed his lips, considering. "You said you saw me dance in New York and San Francisco. Where else?"

"In my mind."

"But your fantasies aren't necessarily mine," Luc remarked, with a flirtatious sideways glance.

Conor almost laughed. This was going to be easier than he had thought. Perhaps the shadows behind those melting brown eyes were strong enough now to bring out into the light. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, so you want to dance with Baryshnikov, too?"

The words were light, but the tension between them increased. It was almost as if Conor had touched the fret of an instrument with his words and tightened the wire. His experienced eyes watched as the young man moved from flattered interest to the first stirring of desire, a craving that could never be satisfied.

Conor looked away. Right here, right now, he could stop, could let Luc Beaulieu dance out of his life as gracefully and unwittingly as he had come into it. He was surprised by the thought, by his own sudden reluctance to continue with the plan. He had been following Luc for weeks. He had chosen him for his stunning good looks, for his burning ambition, and most

of all for the shadows in his soul. Those shadows would make it all possible. If Conor made the next move.

Luc leaned forward, his eyes on his dark companion. "You want to go dancing later?" His voice was low and slightly husky.

Conor felt something tighten in his chest. It was as if that voice had made the decision for him. He pushed back his chair abruptly. "Let's go."

Startled, Luc stared at him, his blond hair shining in the light from the chandeliers. "What about dessert?"

Conor took out his silver money clip and peeled off a wad of bills. "Come."

"A little early for that, isn't it?" Luc murmured, but he got up and followed Conor through the restaurant and out into the street.

Conor filled his lungs with the damp night air and felt as if he had regained his balance. In the light from the street lamps, Luc's natural high color looked drained and pale. On impulse, Conor turned and walked through an archway and down a red brick path into the still dimness of the formal garden behind the restaurant. It was a popular place during the day, but now it was deserted, the topiary sending twisted shadows across the paving stones, the fountain still, its pool a deeper blackness in the night.

"This place is creepy," Luc said, glancing over his shoulder uneasily as the shadows deepened.

Conor turned and looked at him. His veins throbbed with hunger, beating in his ears, pulsing with desire. But at the same time, something held him back. What was it about the young man beside him? The slim-hipped grace of the dancer? The wide eyes, ready to laugh, yet so easily hurt? The sheer strength of his muscles hidden under the crushed velvet jacket and soft silk shirt? Perhaps it was this contrast, this androgyny that drew him in a way no one else had for a very long time. Or perhaps, when he looked at Luc he saw the shadow of another man, from a time long gone.

Conor had always been attracted to men, although when the hunger was on him, the sex of his victim meant nothing. He craved warm flesh, pulsing with life, brimming with experience

that he could, for a few moments, savor as his own. Afterwards, he felt only a mild pity that these strangers had to give up so much so that he could live.

"You've brought me to a pretty gothic spot," Luc remarked. His voice was husky in the shadows.

"You're afraid to perform away from the spotlight?"

"Conor, I don't perform without a contract."

Not for the first time, Conor sensed the steel will under the light exterior. Like the finely toned muscles, this, too, attracted him, made him hunger for the taste of the man's life. For a moment, the craving was so strong that he was disoriented, and he reached out for Luc in the darkness in a reflexive act of need.

"Not so fast." Luc stepped back.

It would have been easy for Conor to lunge, grab, hold Luc down against the old brick wall of the garden and take what he wanted. Luc was very strong, but no match for centuries of power sapped from untold numbers of humans. It would be so easy.... But this one was different. Conor wanted this one to work. All the way.

"It's been interesting," Luc said, watching Conor. "Too interesting, in fact, to end with a fumble in the bushes. Thanks, but no thanks." He turned and walked away.

Conor struggled silently with his rage, a tumbling incoherence of raw hunger and a finer, more subtle need. He could see Luc's slim figure clearly. The shadows meant little to him. He knew Luc would stop and turn back, if only he could move, call out. But the emotions were too much to handle. It was always difficult, those rare occasions when someone touched his heart and left him open to weakness. Like now. Powerless to do anything to stop it, he watched Luc walk away, and felt the utter loneliness seep back into his bones.

The experience had shaken Conor and he made a vow to stay away from the theater. Night after night he paced about his old town house, surrounded by its high iron railings, and cursed himself and the sudden attack of weakness that had kept him from taking Luc in the garden. He left the house only to skulk along the waterfront and through the back alleys, places inhabited

by strays and misfits, people who would not be missed. He gorged himself shamelessly, fighting against the despair and degradation that flowed into his veins. But these excesses only made his longing for a companion stronger. He ached for Luc the way he had done more than half a century ago for the Italian singer, Gianni.

Finally, late one afternoon, Conor came to a decision. He made his way through a series of malls and underground garages to the old Royal Victoria Theater. The stage door was locked, but the rusted mechanism gave easily under Conor's steady strength. The theater had been renovated recently, bringing back the ornate gilded glories of another age, a leisurely elegant time that still lived inside Conor and made his heart sore with memories. Backstage had been extensively refurbished, but it was still essentially the same building that Conor remembered from years ago. He had not come here for a long time after Gianni's accident, but the place was still inside him, part of him, as Gianni had been.

Conor strode along the narrow corridors, up flights of concrete stairs to the rehearsal halls, and paused at a door. Even through the thick walls he could hear the soaring music. He looked in the window and felt his heart lurch. He slipped inside.

The room was filled with the glorious music of Prokofiev. Conor leaned against the wall and almost held his breath as he watched Luc come flying the length of the long room, his apparently effortless leaps carrying him swiftly through the air, so that he was barely on the ground before he was airborne again. He wore nothing but a pair of scant shorts, and his golden body gleamed with sweat. Over and over he leapt, and the muscles of his legs and neck and arms stood out clearly in the glaring light. Although Conor had seen him perform many times, he had never seen him like this, so concentrated, so inward-centered, so at one with the music, which seemed to pick him up and propel him into the air on its own.

Then Luc paused and ran his fingers through his damp hair, his face absorbed in thought. He turned off the music. He swore. Wiping his face with a towel, he glanced up and saw Conor.

"What are you doing here? Offering more intimations of immortality?"

"Did I move too fast the other night?"

"Honey, I just got a little spooked, okay?" Luc grinned and ran his hand over his gleaming bare chest. "Want to try again? I have to finish here first, though."

Conor licked his dry lips. "I'll wait outside. I've got all the time in the world."

Luc winked at him and switched on the music.

Ten minutes later, Luc joined him in the hall, dressed in a sweat suit with a canvas bag over one shoulder. His hair was damp from the shower. "I couldn't concentrate," he said. "I could almost feel you waiting for me. It was...odd."

"Where do you live?"

"Not far."

"I called a taxi," Conor said. "It's waiting."

Luc said nothing. But in the backseat of the car, he slid his hand over to Conor's thigh and left it there.

Luc lived in a high-rise apartment building on the seventeenth floor. "The space outside makes up for the lack of space inside," he said, throwing his dance bag on the floor. "It's a great view."

Conor went over to the wide expanse of windows and closed the drapes. "It's what's inside I want to look at," he said.

"Corny, but nice," Luc remarked. He was pouring drinks, setting them on a tray, adding ice to the bucket beside them. He nodded and led the way into the bedroom, which was almost filled with a huge low bed covered with black and white sheets and pillows.

Conor enjoyed the physical shock of their naked bodies, the instinctive effort to conform to what was wanted, the warm vulnerability of Luc's openness. But the ritual mating frenzy was merely foreplay to Conor. He never let go, never allowed himself to get lost in the other's wonderful hard flesh. This was only the first step.

"You don't look very relaxed," Luc remarked. He opened his mouth for the maraschino cherry Conor held out to him and sucked it off the stem.

"I...want more," Conor said carefully.

"You're insatiable!"

"I mean, I want more than sex."

"There is no more." Luc sat up abruptly.

"You don't mean that."

"Conor, I'm not looking for a lover. I'm married to my career. I thought you knew that."

"Didn't it occur to you that you can have both?"

Luc reached for his drink, took the ice cube out and held it in his mouth for a moment. He leaned forward and let it slide into the hollow of Conor's throat. Conor watched the blood pulse in a vein on Luc's temple and felt his own breath getting shallow. The melting ice cube trickled down his chest.

"I can give you so much," Conor whispered.

"Are you God? Or the Devil?"

"Neither."

"I'm not so sure," Luc murmured.

"Haven't you ever wanted to experiment? Go just a little further? Test your limits?"

Luc laughed low in his throat. "So that's what we're talking about. Why didn't you say so? What are you really into, Conor? Nothing that leaves lasting scars, I hope."

"Sometimes. It depends what limits we're talking about."

"No big deal. A dancer is always pushing. Always trying to get more out of those five positions, you know?"

"I can show you the sixth."

Luc threw one leg over Conor's hips. His brown eyes seemed to deepen as he gazed intently into his companion's pale face. "Ever since I walked away from you the other night, I've been trying to figure out how to find you again. I know you've been following me for some time. I've seen you in the audience, at the receptions. I looked up your name in the major donor list, but I couldn't find your home address anywhere. You're not in the phone book. Even the post office box in the patron file doesn't exist. You're a complete mystery. All I could do was hope and pray you'd come back."

"I'm here."

"I don't know what it is, Conor. I never felt this way before. I keep thinking about you. In class. On-stage. In rehearsal. I

see your face everywhere." He paused, his eyes never leaving Conor's face. "What do you want to do to me?"

Conor felt the slight tremor in the young man's body and he slid his arms around him. "Love you," he said. "My way."

Luc tensed, pushing against the encircling arms. Conor could have held him easily, but he let him go, watching him get off the bed and walk across the room away from him, watching how the light played over the hard muscles of his buttocks, the tender shadow between his powerful legs. He felt his own muscles jump with the tension of restraint.

"You don't believe me," Conor said. "I understand that. But it's true. I can take you places you've never been."

Luc turned to face him. "Show me." He raised his chin and smiled, accepting the challenge.

Conor crossed to the window. He watched the shadows in Luc's eyes as he stood in front of him, breathing deeply. Outside, the sun was going down in fire behind the pale drapes. "Put your hands above your head," Conor said, his voice deep in the dimness of the room.

Luc looked surprised, but he did as he was told. Conor reached up with one hand and grasped both wrists. Slowly, effortlessly, he raised the dancer off his feet, holding him suspended above the floor. He watched the pull of Luc's muscles, the astonishment in his face. He bent his head and licked the salt sweat from Luc's smooth chest.

"Christ!" Luc gasped.

Conor slammed him against the wall, maddened by his closeness. So near.... So very near.... Luc made no move to resist until he felt Conor nip his neck.

"Please! Not where it'll show," he gasped.

Conor paused, then moved his dark head down the muscled chest. He sank his teeth into Luc's right nipple. The dancer cried out, but he fought his own impulse to struggle. Instead, he locked his legs around Conor's waist and arched back against the wall. He was breathing fast.

Conor moaned as the first small trickle of blood touched his tongue. He felt a shadow of Luc's pain and pleasure and fear, and sucked harder.

"No!" Suddenly Luc pulled away from him, kicking out with his powerful legs, struggling to break Conor's grasp. Surprised, Conor released him.

Luc backed away. "It's dangerous," he said.

"If it's the blood you're worried about, forget it. I'm immune. Blood of any sort is life to me."

"Shit!" Luc sank down to the rug on his knees, gazing up at Conor, his face gone pale. "You're crazy."

"Either that, or I'm telling the truth."

"A vampire?"

Conor shrugged. "If you insist."

"You *are* crazy. Stark, raving mad."

"Maybe. But what if I'm not? What if you take a chance with me? And win?"

"Immortality." Luc continued to stare at Conor as the silence lengthened between them. Then he reached up to the bedside table, pulled open the drawer and took out a large gold ring. Wordlessly, he held it out to Conor.

Conor nodded. As he watched, Luc began slowly to bend backward, raising his arms above his head, his back arched, until his dancer's body was curved in a graceful giving arc before Conor. A tear of blood hung like a jewel just underneath the savaged right nipple.

Conor dropped to his knees beside the naked man and bent his head again. A tremor went through Luc but he lay still as Conor bit deeper, until his long canines had pierced the nipple completely and he was sucking Luc's essence into his own. One arm went under the warm body on the floor, cradling him gently in his embrace. Around him the room shimmered in memories, his own, Luc's, swirling through his mind as he tried to keep a hold on reality and not drink too much, too soon. He had a sudden, almost overpowering, urge to go ahead and force Luc into his world. But he wanted awareness, agreement. He wanted a lover, not an unwilling slave. He pulled away. With a strong, steady hand, he fitted the ring in place through the nipple and licked away the blood.

Luc's face was stained with tears. Conor bit into his own finger, opening a small wound. He pushed the finger into Luc's

willing mouth. Luc sucked it obediently as Conor fastened the fingers of his other hand around Luc's erect cock. Luc sucked harder. Conor laid his head on Luc's chest and closed his eyes, feeling the rising passion beneath him mingle with his own consciousness.

At last, Conor rolled away. For the first time, he looked at the framed posters on the walls. Several showed Luc dancing with a wispy ballerina. In one, he was alone, leaping upward as the Bluebird in *Sleeping Beauty*. The expression on his face resembled the look Conor had just witnessed, an exquisite bursting inner joy that carried its own incredible energy.

"What does this mean?" Luc's voice was an exhausted whisper. "Am I...like you, now?"

Conor turned back, studying him intently. One hand touched the gold ring. "Is that what you want?"

"I don't know. I never experienced anything like that before. It was...I don't know how to describe it."

"Think about being able to dance like that forever," Conor said, nodding toward the Bluebird poster. "That's what I can give you."

"Christ!"

"Think about it." Conor got to his feet and began to get dressed.

"Wait!" Luc jumped up, his face flushed with sudden anger. "You can't walk out now!"

"Think very carefully. Do you want me? Do you want this?" Deliberately, Conor looked around at the framed posters on the wall, the photographs, then back to Luc's face. "I can give you both—or neither. There's no compromise."

"Don't play games, Conor."

"Oh, you're a good dancer. Very good. But so are hundreds of others. Without me, you have a chance—perhaps—for one brief flash of recognition. With me, you have the certainty of timeless fame."

"So you're saying that without you I'll never make it?" Luc's voice shook with anger.

"This isn't about making it. It's about being a legend."

"And after one night of wild sex with you I'm supposed to make up my mind about eternity?"

"I have the advantage, here," Conor said. "I know how you really feel. About your career. About me."

"Bastard!" Luc's hand closed around the bronze figure of a dancer that stood on the table beside him. In one smooth move, he raised the figure and threw it at Conor's head with all his considerable force. Conor moved his head a fraction of an inch, and the figure whizzed by and crashed against the wall behind him, chipping the plaster.

"Is that your answer?" Conor whispered.

Luc turned away, but not before Conor saw his tears. He waited. Luc was stronger than he had thought. For a moment, the bleak possibility occurred to him that he might lose this man, just as he had lost Gianni. Then Luc turned back. Slowly, he sank to the floor. "Do it," he whispered. His arms reached out to Conor. "I want to dance forever!"

Conor knelt beside him and ran his hands down the fine-muscled body that throbbed with longing. The gold ring gleamed against the reddened nipple. Conor took a deep breath. "After I take your blood, you must take mine."

"Like we just did?"

"That was merely a gesture. There has to be a prolonged exchange, or the transformation doesn't work. That's very important. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Luc closed his eyes.

Conor began to lick the inside of Luc's thigh until he felt the artery pulse strongly under his tongue. He opened his mouth and pierced the smooth skin. As he sucked the warm blood down his parched throat, bright images exploded in his brain and he heard music—dance music. The feeling was so strong that he almost felt lifted off the ground by the force of Luc's longing. His dark head gently moved up and down as he hit his rhythm. He could feel Luc relax and begin to respond to this new kind of love-making. His back arched, his head turned to one side, then the other. He moaned.

But as the minutes passed, Luc's body stilled. Conor was suddenly aware of something else—other feelings, thoughts coming from Luc. He felt his mind cry out as he finally came to himself again and recognized what was happening.

"No!" Conor sat up abruptly and tore at his own wrist with his teeth, opening a vein. "Luc, drink this. Now!"

Luc opened his eyes and smiled weakly. "I can't," he whispered. "I can't do it."

"You can! You will!"

"I'm sorry. I want to be with you. I do. But I can't dance forever. No one does."

"*You* could!"

"But who would I dance with? No, Conor. It wouldn't work. It isn't meant to work that way—don't you see?"

"You're not thinking right, Luc! Just do as I say!"

"Everything's clear as a bell. How many times can you win the International Dance Competition?"

"As many times—"

"No. Then it doesn't mean anything." He paused and closed his eyes. His mouth opened slightly as his breathing became more shallow.

Conor bent closer and moistened the dancer's lips with his tongue. "What about me?" he whispered.

"You said it was both or neither. I want you, but I guess..." Luc's voice trailed off.

"Then take me! Just me!"

Conor cradled the dying man in his arms and tried to force him to drink the blood that pulsed out of his own wrist.

Luc refused. "Then I couldn't dance." His voice was just a thread on the air. His face was pale now, paper white against the vivid jewel colors of the rug. Conor's blood splashed unheeded onto his chest. His eyelids fluttered.

Frantically, Conor massaged the smooth, hard chest, trying to restart the silent heart by the sheer force of his own longing. At last he sat back on his heels and stared at Luc. His black eyes burned with the fever of his own desire, his feelings, his thoughts, tumbled and mixed with Luc's.

"No," he whispered. "Not again."

Conor leaned forward suddenly and scooped the dancer's naked body into his arms. He got to his feet, the body clasped tightly, Luc's golden head resting against his bare chest. He began to pace about the apartment, at first slowly, as if in thought.

Then his steps became faster, his breathing short, rasping in his throat. His energy bursting into action, he flung back the balcony door and leapt outside into the orange shadows of the darkening city. He felt that his heart would burst. He threw back his head and howled.

“No-o-o! Luc! Gianni!”

High over the city, a keening sound, like the wind, swept across the night sky.



GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

ROBERT DEVEREAUX

WEIRD Jimmy went the wrong way.

That's what set Sam off—watching O'Rourke's beat-up Valiant turn right instead of left out of the parking lot at the fire station, knowing now for sure what he had only begun to suspect: that Weird Jimmy was humping his wife.

Frank Cruz, face brown as oil on concrete, refused to meet Sam's look; Cruz was concentrating much too hard, Sam thought, on cleaning water spots off Old Faithful's chrome. He was the best pump man Sam had ever trained, but he was also Jimmy O'Rourke's sniggering friend. And he knew—the stiff-jawed, brown-eyed bastard knew.

Over by the water cooler, Ed Nix had his chair tilted back against the wall; he was flipping through *Field and Stream* and wagging one outsized foot. Nearby, Burton and Breen, gulping coffee from Styrofoam, were embroiled in an unending debate over sports. But the air felt different today. A shift had occurred. The mood of the men, their movements, their glances toward Sam, then away—the way Slim Parker stared out into the moon-

light, tugging absently on his earlobe—told Sam all he needed to know.

They knew.

Damn fucking bastards knew, every one of 'em.

Sam's throat constricted. He'd slapped these wet-eared pups into shape, drilled them silly, instilled in them the best that fire-fighting had to offer, led them through more than one inferno; but rank rankled, no matter where you went on God's green earth, and the underlings were lined up against him on this one, protecting their own. Fuck authority, that was their credo; and if you couldn't do that, then by heaven you fucked its wife, or you backed a buddy with balls enough for the job.

Sam's head was pounding. An animal idea surged up in him like the need to piss. He'd call Parker over, pretend sickness, put him in charge, drive on home, and send Grace and her fucking paramour straight to hell. Simple as one, two, three. Husbands had rights, even in this day and age. And he was about to exercise one of the oldest.

But just as Sam barked out Parker's name, beckoning to him with a jerk of his arm, alarm bells jagged through the night air.

For an instant, the firehouse froze; then it exploded into chaos like an anthill smashed under a sneaker. Men dashed about, donning fire gear, poling down from above, flaring up engines or clambering onto them. Sam kicked into frenzy mode, shouting orders left and right, though his new undercurrent of vengeance refused to be stilled. If anything, it grew greater.

Sam leaped onto Old Faithful's running board, craned back for a quick head count, then hauled himself into the passenger seat and shouted to his driver, "Tear out, Krenshaw!" Old Faithful jounced onto the roadway, leading three other engines wailing urgency through the midnight streets of North Falls, New Hampshire.

It was a two-alarm fire at the mini-mall on the east edge of town. But by the time he and his men arrived in their triple-combination pumper, everything seemed under control. Sam was ninety percent certain of it, enough to be sure that his vengeance wasn't going to put any lives in jeopardy.

None of his men were rookies or probies. He didn't need to

tell them what every trainee learns on day one—that all buildings have twelve surfaces, six inside and six out. He ordered them around the back to lend support to the boys from Fire Station 88, and they obeyed without question. When the last of them grabbed an ax and rounded the charred corner of the Quik-Stop, Sam hoisted himself into the driver's seat, released the handbrake, and eased out of the parking lot as surreptitiously as a five-ton renegade fire truck can manage.

Sam parked the rig a few blocks from home, beside an undeveloped lot. Stripping off his fire gear, he took up a Halligan tool—a pry bar with a fork on one end, a point and an adze on the other—and set out for the split-level ranch house they had moved into three years before.

On the way, he passed O'Rourke's rattletrap excuse for a car; he'd seen it often enough at the Bowl-O-Rama on league nights when neither he nor Weird Jimmy were on at the firehouse. Once or twice he noticed the grinning fool trace his eye along Grace's curves, but he hadn't given it much thought. That was just Weird Jimmy's way. And Grace had seemed, if anything, repelled by his schoolboy antics, his filthy language, and his beer-chugging, chain-smoking, spindly-legged, potbellied, bald-headed wreck of a body.

Sam grimaced.

Grace had been one hell of an actress.

He skirted the fence that separated his lot from old man Arnold's, eased his back-door key into the lock, and let himself in on the basement landing, five steps below the first floor. The door to the kitchen swung silent as silk on its well-oiled hinges.

The Halligan hung heavy in Sam's hand. Tightening his grip on its haft, he moved through the kitchen toward the dining room and the dim hallway beyond.

Grace hugged Jimmy tight, above and below. She thrust her tongue deep into his mouth, coming up off her pillow to do it. Jesus, she loved the aroma of nicotine about his face—so inviting, so tasty, so sinful.

She loved lots about him, this quirky, middle-aged, twice-

divorced firefighter. Mostly maybe, she loved the boyish attention he paid to her body. Grace hadn't been loved so ardently since she'd let Joey Molinari take her in the back seat of his father's Chevy Impala in 1978.

Grace looked longingly up into her lover's blush pink face. It was a funny face, full of character, full of a life lived to the hilt. Not like Sam, her staid husband of six years and zero kids. Poor sap loved Old Faithful more than he loved her, the way he fondled its hydrant intake.

"Oh, my sweet Jimmy!" Grace murmured.

"Here it comes again," he said. "Can you feel the tip tingling, babydoll? Feels like a fucking Fourth-of-July sparkler dipped—*unngh!*—in ginger ale."

Grace twisted her head on the pillow.

A shape moved in the mirror over the dresser.

Then a whirl of impressions rushed in upon her: A knuckled hand gripping the door, the high cry of hinges, the door hurled open, slamming like a rifle shot into the wall, Sam rushing in, a long metal rod raised, shouting something, Jimmy slipping out of her, whipping about, saying "What the—?", falling under a vicious blow, his body being wrenched off her so violently that he whirled over Sam's side of the bed and slammed to the floor, herself defenseless before Sam's wrath, raising her arms to fend off attack, a loud "noooo" upon her lips, the whicker of metal coming down, the impossible pressure at her skull, then...

Solid oblivion.

Sam paused.

The bitch and her bastard were still breathing. He could stave their heads in right here and now, pummel them until their flesh turned to pulp. Part of him wanted just that.

He might even be able to sneak back to the fire, make this look like a burglary attempt, steal his wife's purse, lift a fucking toaster oven.

No way. No one would buy that for a minute. They'd know. Worse than that, he'd have skulked. Like a common criminal. As if he were ashamed of taking vengeance on his wife and her lover. Hell, they'd pin a medal on him and he'd goddamn deserve

it too. Knock some sense back into sinning America, show this country that the tried and true codes are best. Find your woman at it with another man? You had a right, by God, to trash them right then and there!

Grabbing a hank of Grace's long auburn hair, Sam whipped the tool up into the air. She was out, pliant as a rag doll. Weird Jimmy moaned on the floor like a burn victim; the bastard's voice enraged him. Fucker had raped Sam's life.

Then the idea came to him, full blown. He saw it all at once—Old Faithful paying Sam back for his years of devotion. There was vengeance, and there was vengeance. And then there was fucking poetic justice!

Jimmy was back inside the roiling Motel 6, lots of plastic burning, smoke billowing so thick and black your hands disappeared in front of you. Lieutenant Gregerson tugged on his sleeve, and he charged after him through the door, letting himself be pulled to a crouch on the burnt-orange carpet where a hefty woman—clocking in at close to two hundred pounds, he'd guess—lay charred like blackened swordfish. But Jimmy sucked in a deep breath, removed his SCBA, and pressed it down over the woman's nose and mouth. Her lips wriggled. By God, the fat lady was alive. They tugged on her, then realized she'd been burned through her dress and her skin was sticking to the rug. Jimmy lifted with all his might.

No go.

But then a slit like a hot-dog blister steamed open in her face and she roared in pain and her body fat started to sizzle and spatter like butter dancing on a skillet. Her flaming fingers reached up and snatched off Jimmy's mask just as he needed breath. PVC from the melting plastic barbed into his lungs, blurring his vision with tears.

Then, though he couldn't open his eyes, the air he breathed started to clear, became rich with divinity. He was baby-naked under sunlight, feathered in swan's down, and a hand—lovely Grace's hand—soothed his forehead. "There, there, dear boy," she said. "You're in good hands with Allstate."

Her touch proved it. Her hands moved gentle upon him and

he could smell the perfect closure of her sex. His cheek rested warm against her inner thigh, but as he rose from his dream the hands roughened and the surface he lay upon grew harder. Not feathers, no; more like a floor or the top of a table. One of her fingers, thick and brutal as a bludgeon, invaded his anus, pushing hard and deep and freezing cold up into him, persisting there with ungentle pressure. Kisses ripped the air. She wrapped a thin arm round his belly (*rrrrrip-kiss!*), up over his buttocks (*rrrrrip-kiss!*), and back to his navel. Again and again, as if they belonged to Plastic Man, thin arms tightened about him like a truss.

Jimmy's knees hurt. He tried to shift positions, but his legs refused to budge. Then a familiar throb of pain jackknifed into his skull, and with it came memory of the forbidden bed, the genital clutch and release below, the sudden rush of intrusion at his back, cool air against his prick as he withdrew, the enraged face of Sam Giulini, the whip-crush of steel persuading him with inexorable logic to descend into darkness.

"For God's sake, leave the poor bastard alone!" It was Grace's voice, harsh and hateful.

"What the fuck did *I* do—?" Jimmy began to protest, but it came out an incoherent mumble, and then he realized she wasn't angry at him. He bleared one eye open, tried to focus in the harsh light; couldn't, closed it. Then he sighed, still feeling the warmth of Grace's thigh against his cheek and the cold finger thrust between his buttocks. He slitted both eyes open.

"*You're* one to call upon God." Jimmy recognized the voice of Sam Giulini. "I'm just going to give the sonofabitch what he deserves."

"But it'll kill him."

"That's the idea," came Giulini's answer, dark and cold as a cavern. "You, too."

"Whoa, whoa, I say whoa right there," Jimmy said in his best Foghorn Leghorn basso, his voice muffled by Grace's flesh. He tried to move his hands but discovered they were bound behind his back. "What the fucking bejesus is going on here?" He craned his head on Grace's thigh and took in what he could. He appeared to be sprawled on half a Ping-Pong table, dark green with a

white stripe up the center, its net gone, though the short metal stanchions rose stiff and shiny from their clamps. He couldn't see his captor; just heard his footsteps move away, then return. One of Grace's curls tickled Jimmy's nose. She was sitting up on the other half of the table, roped into one of those cushion chairs, the kind you use for reading in bed. Her legs stretched taut over Jimmy's shoulders, secured somehow behind him. He had a mouth's-eye view of her private parts. As beautiful as they were, there in the harsh glare cast by one bare hanging light bulb, Jimmy figured his days for enjoying them were probably over.

A hand fisted his hair, wrenching his head up. Giulini's face loomed in his eyes. "You're about to pay the piper, you shit-fucking bastard—that's what's going on!" Giulini released him and his face gave a loud slap against Grace's thigh. "You've *had* your dance—your little hugger-mugger—with my woman. Now I'm exacting the price."

"Come now, Sam, me lad."

That was it. Put the wise Irish to him. That invariably did the trick down at the firehouse. Always raised a smile, even on the sullen mugs of the toughest, meanest machoids ever to hump hose.

"You and me, we're grownups. This is America, lad. The joke's gone far enough, don't you think?"

"It's no joke—"

"You've rammed summat up me butt, and I have to tell you it's damned fucking uncomfterble's what it is. How's about you ease the spike or the bit of pipe out of me and let me skedaddle home as best I'm able with a throbbing asshole?"

A laugh. Not the reassuring kind. "You want to know what it is?" Giulini held two thick tubes of something in one hand—caulking was Jimmy's first guess—an old square of cardboard and a paint stirrer in the other. "It's the business end of a one-and-a-half-inch nozzle, which is connected to a two-and-a-half-inch line, which runs out to Old Faithful parked outside. No fire hydrant around, but the tank in the rig ought to yield up about two minutes of pretty persuasive punishment, don't you think?"

"You're fucking insane!"

"I've wrapped plenty of duct tape around the collar, and around you, so it won't rocket out of you when I open up the nozzle—"

"—Christ you wouldn't—"

"—which I'll be doing—"

"—That's three fucking gallons a second—!"

"—after I cement your relationship with Grace, here; after I see if I can't provide a tighter bond between you two." Uncapping the tubes, Giulini squeezed out something from each one onto the cardboard. "I like to watch happy couples cling to each other, don't you? Seal their love with a lasting kiss?" He recapped the tubes and swished the stirrer against the cardboard with a quick whipping sound.

"All right, Giulini," Jimmy's voice was as pale as his face. "The joke's gone far enough, you're scaring the shit out of me. It's time you stopped this foolishness and let Grace and me—"
(smack!)

Giulini's backhand came out of nowhere and flared Jimmy's face with pain. "That's enough." (smack!) "I need you to be very compliant (smack!) from here on out."

"Leave him alone, Sam!"

(smack!)

Jimmy was having a hard time focusing on his words. Something about needing his lips (smack!) nice and loose. When the battering stopped and Giulini used the paint stirrer to smear a slug of moon-white epoxy, warm and stenchy, across Jimmy's lower lip, Jimmy gave out with a string of pleas and cries.

Then Grace started shrieking, and Giulini was suddenly gone and just as suddenly back, whacking her into silence with a two-by-four and whirling about to bring it down on Jimmy's head.

For one mad moment, Sam had considered setting them free, taking Weird Jimmy's cue and calling it all a joke meant to scare the purity back into both of them.

But the epoxy was no joke.

The epoxy decided it for him.

Once they were joined, lip to labia, Sam knew there was no turning back. It would take the help of outsiders to undo the

damage he'd done to Grace and Jimmy; and that would mean ruin for him, the loss of his reputation, his livelihood, his position in the community. Far better to hose them, bury them, and be done with it.

He already faced demotion or suspension—possibly even termination—for stealing the pumper; maybe he could blame it on stress, take a week or two of unpaid vacation as penance, tell them the strain of finding little Rana Carlson down on Sullivan Street last month—all charred and brittle, her blond ponytail perversely untouched by the searing flame—the vision of that had finally caught up with him and knocked him off his nut.

Sam tested the bonding with his fingers, stretching and pulling the flesh where the two of them were joined. No weak spots, no place that would spring a leak and keep Grace from bearing the full brunt of her sins.

They were coming around now. That was good.

A gash warped across Grace's skull where he'd brained her. The crust of blood over her left eyelid made it hard to open. Sam went to the sink near the dryer, grabbed a washcloth hanging over the spout, unstarched it with hot water, and dabbed it against her eyelid until her skin shone white again and she could open both eyes.

"Where am I?" she said.

Sam didn't answer her. He just bent down, nuzzled his cheek against the warm yielding of her breast, and took her nipple into his mouth one last time, feeling it nestle like perfection against his tongue.

"Sam?"

Confusion.

Then an intake of breath. "Oh, no, oh, God Sam, I'm sorry. Honey, please untie me, I promise to be a good wife from now on." There was guile in her voice. She'd run to the cops, first thing.

Sam realized Grace couldn't see what he'd done to her; his head obscured her vision. He took one final sense impression of the teasing rightness of her nipple filling his mouth and then rose up, letting her moist tit plip back down like a dropped strawberry quivering on a mound of vanilla pudding. Her view

was unimpeded now. "I'm afraid that's no longer possible, Grace," he said quietly.

He expected her to scream. That's what would happen in a movie. Instead there was a gasp and then a steady stream of high-pitched whimpers, as if she were a young shoplifter hauled down to the police station for a good scare and a stern talking-to. Grace knew him well enough to realize the futility of further pleading, and that put him off balance for a moment; he didn't like to think that he'd been unfair, unyielding, some sort of monster.

A muffled groan sounded from below.

No, he was a kind man, and brave. He was a saver of lives. He had his share of scars and burns to prove it, earned out on the surround-and-drown circuit. He had taken in smoke, played pump man and lead-off man, been on the tip more times than he could count, felt the fucker buck like a humpbacked Brahma bull when water rampaged through it, surging so fast it threatened to tear his arms from their sockets and lift him ten feet in the air.

Sam looked down. Weird Jimmy's face was beet-red with fury, his eyes watery and insane. He was humping helplessly against his bonds, making the Ping-Pong table shift and shimmy.

Sam almost pitied him.

Suddenly the heater kicked in. The vehemence of the pilot light's whoosh into ringed fire startled him. Sound was so brash and unashamed down here beneath the house; no wallboard or curtains to soften the starkness of it, just pale green walls of concrete ramming it straight into your brain. Same thing with the bare bulb. It stripped these two to their unspeakable animal essence—Sam saw Grace for the first time as she was. Really. Beneath her clothing, beneath the makeup, beneath the pretense of love she'd snared him with seven years before.

"Please, Sam, please let me go," Grace pleaded, her face a mess of tears. The ropes dug deep and ruddy into the flesh of her upper arms.

His loathing for her came over him like a wave—no, it felt more like the horned hand of a demon fisting up into his bowels and flowering open, flames shooting from its leathered palm to ravage Sam's body. She was so weak, so unworthy; an incon-

venience, an excrescence, something to be dispatched like an injured filly.

It was time.

Things were converging in Sam's head. He positioned himself between Weird Jimmy's splayed legs, preparing for the jolt, unsure the tape would be sufficient against the hammer of water. His trained right hand gripped the shut-off valve and eased it up and back.

The open hose tugged against the tape, but it held. Still Sam rammed the nozzle solidly in place just to be sure, the blocky muscles of his arms and chest straining with the effort. Weird Jimmy's bound hands clenched and unclenched like dying spiders at the small of his back. Out of anger and into desperation and panic, his sealed mouth rose up in pitch. But there was nothing he could do to stave off death. The cold firestream screamed out of Old Faithful, across the lawn, down through the basement window, and up into O'Rourke, with the 60-PSI punch of a prizefighter. The Ping-Pong table bucked and heaved as the unstoppable fist of water slammed up into him, pushing organs aside or tearing them asunder and shooting them forward, in its mad dash out of the nozzle.

Weird Jimmy flopped like a fish, helpless before the force tearing through him. His voice gurgled up like a bottleneck, filling. And then it was no longer him voicing his complaints at all, but the water's insistence that fluted in his throat. His flared nostrils atomized dark crimson spray along Grace's hips. His cheeks bulged like balloons. At first Sam feared they'd burst and Grace would escape her fate; but then he heard the sharp crack of a jawbone, and the waterspout and its offal cargo surged forward into his wife.

"That's right," Sam grunted, still pressing forward with all his weight. "You wanted the sonofabitch inside you, you've got him! Take him! Take all of him!"

Grace's whimpering stopped and her face twisted into a down-right quizzical expression. The look in her eyes tore at Sam, sent shame coursing up into him, brought to mind her veiled face beaming at their wedding. His brain whirled. This was his bride, his beloved Grace; yes, she'd faltered badly, stumbled, even, but

maybe the blame was partly his, maybe it wasn't too late to make it up to her. He'd find some way to unseal her from O'Rourke without involving outsiders; maybe he'd X-Acto the bastard free just behind the lip line. Like some spooked rookie, all thumbs, Sam's hand fumbled for the shut-off. But Grace's uterus swelled to the size of a soccer ball, a basketball, a beachball, and it threatened to whoosh forward or burst at any moment.

She grabbed a lungful of air, her breasts rising like sudden loaves, and screamed. With the shut-off under his hand at last, Sam watched the sides of her rib cage ripple up her torso like cartoon xylophones.

He froze.

"No," he gasped, drained suddenly of all will.

Grace's chest swelled, as with pride.

Her white neck snapped backward, the top of her skull curving down along the high back of her cushioned chair.

Abruptly, her mouth began to gush.

He watched the pent-up torrent vomit unceasingly from her, arcing up in a sickening parabola of blood and bone, suet and shit, bile and gristle and gore—splashing against the pale green concrete wall behind her.

Sam cried then. And through his tears, he saw the gush grow clearer. At long last he closed the shut-off, watching the waterfall out of Grace's mouth dribble across her open eyes, dying down.

In the distance, he heard sirens. Far away at first, then closer. Water dripped indifferently to the floor. But Sam just stood there, nozzle in hand, feeling empty. He tried to focus on the task at hand, the impossible task of cleaning up the mess he'd made of his basement, his Ping-Pong table, his life, his wife—his dear, dead Grace.

A USEFUL TRICK OF THE TRADE

D. F. LEWIS

There were telltale signs on her body—the handprint-shaped bruises around the rib cage, the mouth, still full of two tongues, hers and somebody else's, and the nipples, showing signs of excessive manipulation, half hanging off like gristly scabs. She had evidently died during the act of lovemaking. Still clasped within her fists were tufts of stringy black hair, and there was blood caked under her toenails.

In all, the slightly decomposing carcass revealed evidence of a mutually violent passion, rather than an act of rape by either party. It was difficult to be absolutely certain because I was merely looking at one side of the story, as it were. *If* there was another body, there was no sign of it, neither its presence nor any mode of its exit from the flat.

Needless to say, being a churchgoer, stumbling upon this sight in my own flat, I was more than a little shocked out of my mind. But, of course, there was *some* need to say it....

Without further thought, however, I knelt beside the bed, palms pressed together, like fleshy moth wings, and called upon God, rather than the police. I suppose I was administering last

rites, in the desperate hope that it was not too late. I did my best, under the circumstances, with an amateur production albeit, but one that might have hit the high notes along the way.

The following Sunday, I could not find my usual church. This was most disconcerting because I had been attending it since I was a small child. Where it should have been was a block of flats.

Somewhat in despair, I gave myself the benefit of the doubt, becoming convinced that it had always been in the next street. The first street, however, turned out to be longer than I remembered, with rank upon rank of unbroken terraced housing eventually arriving at the park gates. I knew all along that the church was nowhere near because I could not see its spire, which would have poked up higher than the TV aerials.

As a child, I had dreamed that the church was really a rocket ship. After all, it looked like one, despite being old-fashioned and bedecked with stone gargoyles. I'd heard of sending monkeys into outer space...but statues and icons? If Mrs. Smith had been cleaning out the pews when it happened, she must have gotten an almighty shock.

I shook my head in disbelief. Was I *really* thinking these things? Perhaps that incident during the week was taking its toll on my mind. Which was not surprising. I could hardly credit that the police, when they eventually arrived on the scene, were almost giving the impression that *I* was the chief suspect in a case of murder. After all, they said. Who else was there? It *was* my flat, wasn't it? What was the dead woman doing there? Not surprisingly, I was dumbfounded at their damned nerve.

I found the church at last, tucked away in a nondescript cul-de-sac—quite close to where I lived, as it happened.

Yes, it did look a bit like a rocket ship—but a lot of churches do, don't they? Except those with square towers, of course. And, oh, yes. Those newfangled Catholic ones with bits of sculpture outside in the guise of oblique builders' scaffolding.

Today I was so much in awe of my God and Savior that I literally knelt down in the grounds of the church and made the rest of the way by crawling, in the process scraping off bits of my stockings, and then skin, and then splinters of my kneecaps.

Once inside, it was certainly a useful trick of the trade to know how to pray in silence—unlike those tub-thumping hot gospelers who seem to do *everything* with their goddamn tongues.

Rest assured, dear God, I am not praying to You only on my own behalf, for that would be more than a little selfish. I am also pleading your gracious mercy and forgiveness for that poor soul the police ended up arresting from next door to my flat. He was viewing *Crimewatch* on TV at the time, I believe. I know the police are not easily fooled, but I am still unconvinced of that man's guilt, My Sweet Lord, because from what the police had found inside the corpse, they should have been looking for a suspect who was made of plastic. Or am I getting confused, Lord? Only You can tell, I'm sure.



ATTACHMENTS

DEIDRA COX

Nikki felt the heat reach for her across the crowded bar, the slow, cloying tendrils of a heavy lust seeping into her bones. She quickly scanned the smoky maze, discounting the bland, doughy faces that desperately peered into hers.

Then, Nikki located the source. The man stood apart from the rest of the hive, regarding her with a tight smile. Long black hair poured down his shoulders in a dark wave. The silky mane shimmered in the dim light, giving Nikki an undeniable urge to run her fingers through the black softness.

Sharp, angled features. Even, white teeth. Quick tongue darting between them. But the eyes. The piercing coal-black eyes. They delved into her, probing past the flimsy barriers she had erected long ago. His stare left her drained, breathless.

Then, abruptly, he turned his attention to another, leaving Nikki empty. Hungry.

The slut was blonde, heavy paint slapped on in a coarse mask. Hatred so strong that it felt like a separate entity flooded Nikki's chest.

How many more times would she have to play this game, Nikki wondered.

When will he decide I've suffered enough?

Watching the couple carefully, Nikki collected her purse and waited. When the blonde's shapely backside twisted away, Nikki made a hasty exit and followed.

The driving beat of the jukebox pushed Nikki on, instilling a sense of urgency. The need to be whole. Complete. And that simply wasn't possible as long as the slut was in the picture.

The bathroom was a scaled-down version of the bar. Fragrant clouds of perfume floated overhead, clashing with the pungent odor of stale urine and sweat. Lipsticks dulled by the poorly lit mirror. Frantic grooming. Fresh coats of cheap mascara.

Slipping a hand in her purse, Nikki took her place behind the blonde and waited patiently. A thin layer of black roots peeked along the woman's crown, exposing her fraud. Finally it was the phony blonde's turn. The blonde pushed the stall door open, and Nikki quickly stepped inside with the unsuspecting woman, trapping her.

Startled, the woman babbled, "What the hell—"

Nikki shrugged and smiled. "Oh, shit, guess I shouldn't have had that last beer." Free hand closing on its objective.

Before the slut had a chance to react, Nikki slammed the knife in the bare throat, careful to avoid the main artery. Blood seeped to the hollow between the heaving breasts. Eyes bulging in disbelief. Fingers clawing, snatching for tiny pockets of air....

Nikki watched quietly until the woman collapsed on the grimy toilet, legs sprawled in a clumsy salute. Then, she maneuvered from the stall, closed the door behind her, and faced the next customer in line.

"Sorry, hon, but it's taken," Nikki said, then waltzed on out to the bar.

He was still there. Head bobbing to the whiskey rhythm, nails clicking against the bar. Nikki swallowed hard. The slow, familiar weight nestled in her belly, coiling like a snake.

This time it was going to last. She had to believe that.

Licking her lips, she made her approach. *Slow and easy*, Nikki thought.

"Would you like to go for a ride?"

Black eyes appraised her worth, the heat of his stare leaving her shaken. He smiled, a flash of white enamel. Nikki imagined those teeth biting into her flesh, and she shivered.

"Tempting offer," he said. "But I think I'll pass." Turning away, he casually dismissed her while he took a long drink.

"She's not coming back."

Eyebrows arched in surprise. "Really? And how would you know?"

"I saw your lady take off with someone else. A tall Chicano. The blonde seemed quite attracted to him, if you know what I mean."

Tongue flickered near the corner of her mouth. Saliva glistened. "So, do you want to come home with me?"

The man gave a short laugh. "You didn't even ask my name. Don't you care? It's a tough world out there. I could be anybody."

Nikki shook her head, laughed, soft eyes touching his. "Does it really matter? Aren't names just another part of the charade? Be honest with yourself. Do you want it?"

Her breath froze as she waited for his answer. A thousand years spanned the seconds.

His eyes appraised her. "Guess I do," he said. "Your place or mine?"

Nikki grimaced at the age-old cliché. "Let me take care of that."

He slid from the stool and towered over her. The long, taut lines of his frame made Nikki's mouth go uncomfortably dry, but she forced a smile and led him through the tangle of bodies obstructing the door.

Anticipation. Fanning the flame. The damp heat between her legs.

And did she imagine a commotion as they left the bar? Had they found the blonde?

The trip to Nikki's hotel was an eternity. He mouthed most of the appropriate responses while waiting for the easy lay. As he removed his jacket, Nikki initiated the game. He never saw the attack. A sharp blow applied to the base of the skull. But not too hard. After all, she needed him to be conscious.

When he came to, the gag was stuffed in his mouth, the bonds securely in place. Hands tied above his head. Legs stretched in an open V. The inevitable struggle. And—finally—acceptance.

"Just a moment, my love," Nikki whispered and withdrew the scissors from the nightstand.

Sparks flared in his black eyes as she leaned over him and traced the sides of his throat with the keen point. Using clean, precise strokes, she cut the shirt from his body. The shredded fabric fluttered to the floor like autumn leaves dancing on the wind.

His belt slipped through the loops, and she eased it around his neck, draping the strap loosely past the buckle. His jeans tugged from his hips, and she left them bunched at his thighs. Dropping the scissors beside him, Nikki straddled her captive slowly.

Uncertainty slithered along her spine as his face blurred. The lean edges dissolved into fullness. Panic rose like bile. He was leaving her. Again.

"No," Nikki cried. "Not yet!"

She fell upon him, sucking and licking, tasting the special flavor of this particular disguise. Her tongue blazed a path across his chest, creeping lower and lower till she reached the swollen nest.

He moaned, betraying his reluctant excitement. Body arched. Eyes tightly shut. Lost in the sensation. So close. So damn close.

Slow down, Nikki thought, lust miring her judgment. *Don't rush it.*

Pulling away, Nikki left him wanting. Dark eyes watched as she undressed. Firm, rich breasts. Trim waist. Tight ass. Long, long legs.

She pleased him. The sight of her. She knew this and reveled in the luxury of his approval. Cool air caressed her skin, making her ache for the fire.

Curling beside him, Nikki glided her fingers down his torso. Erect nipples stabbed her mouth, and she raked her teeth across the tips. He groaned against the gag and she trembled.

Unable to resist the silken emptiness, Nikki climbed atop him again and eased the thrusting organ inside her. Filled to the brim. Captured. Swollen member pulsing within. They moved together. Sliding and rocking. The delicious friction between them building.

Nikki felt herself pausing on the edge, ready to tumble into the abyss and she wanted to weep with joy. At last. She quickly grabbed the belt and yanked the strap around his neck.

His body stiffened, lungs demanding air, limbs struggling against the ropes. Pulling and jerking. Head bouncing from side to side. Eyes begging.

"Give it to me," Nikki gasped as the velvet torment rode ever closer. So close she could almost taste the golden peak. Bucking her hips, she felt the flames licking at her vagina, teasing her to the point of madness.

Yes, oh, yes. Strap gripped tight.

Suddenly the frantic movements ceased, and a low rattle issued deep in his chest. She worked the strap, yanking his head off the mattress. Anything to prolong the moment, the elusive ecstasy.

But no use. He sagged to the bed like a broken doll. Hands hung limp. Eyes vacant. Blank.

"No," Nikki panted. "Don't do this to me!"

Maybe it wasn't too late. His penis was still rigid, locked inside her. Grinding her hips on his groin. Nikki rubbed herself against him, trying to rekindle the dying ash.

Not again. She had done everything. Just like he'd asked. That was the way it was supposed to go. And now, to be denied. Found lacking. Tears of frustration spilled as she faced yet another failure. The dark god of her dreams had vanished. Chubby cheeks and faded scars ruined the once ideal profile. Thinning brown curls adorned the fallen head. His former beauty lost.

Pain twisted in her belly like maggots invading a fresh corpse. Despair rolled into a darker emotion and Nikki snatched the scissors.

Flash of silver. Red spray. Raw meat. Fragments of gore.

The scissors sliced through loose flesh, ripped bloody strips. Skin peeled away to reveal the secrets hidden below. Glistening treasures. Warm viscera in ragged hole.

The first wave rocked Nikki in mid-thrust. Spasm and spasm shook her body, filling her mind with flashes of glorious color. Spine arching, riding the solid organ that would never fail her.

And all around her, the fountain flowed crimson.

The pulsing lights of the disco vibrated across the churning mass. Frantic coupling to a generic beat.

Nikki surveyed the smoky press with open distaste. No passion. No fire. Only the automatic responses of deadened shells. Such a waste. Pushing her drink away, she decided to call it a night. Another impotent exercise. No chance for redemption to be found.

She was halfway to the exit when she felt it. A bright ember quickening between her legs. Breasts swelled, ripened like the petals of a flowering vine as the heat traveled. Deepened.

Revolving in a complete circle, she searched the gyrating horde. Hope flared like a shooting star. Then she saw him, leaning on a table, chatting to a group of fresh-faced coeds. Long black hair trailed down his back in an ebony rope. Salvation beckoned underneath black denim.

He was perfect.

As always.

FARLEY'S LAST INTERVIEW

MAX SWYFT

Farley Hagen disembarked from the Amtrak with a worn suitcase. An autumn wind whipped dust and leaves about the deserted platform. The narrow station sign waved in cool gusts, the name Desoleville barely discernible in faded letters.

He went through the old door with bevelled glass and pushed it shut behind him. On the wall, a large round clock with black hands reminded him of his aunt's old schoolhouse where he'd played as a child. The benches were not made of molded plastic or aluminum, but of the curved wood of church pews.

Behind a narrow grill stood a whiskered old man wearing a flat Civil War cap. On the marble counter, nicotine-stained fingers held the dog-eared pages of a *Saturday Evening Post*.

"Help ye?" the old man said.

Farley stepped up to the counter and thought how far he was from civilization, that exclusive office building in midtown Manhattan, and the striking attorney who had hired him. "Transportation?"

Outside, the Amtrak shrieked a metallic wail as it pulled from the station. Cloudy cataract eyes studied him from behind the iron

grille of the station counter. The old man nodded at the departing train. "There it goes."

"A cab. Do you have cabs here?"

"Sure ye got the right place, mister?" said cataract eyes, glancing at the train as it disappeared in the closing dusk.

"Desoleville?" Farley Hagen asked.

Nicotine-stained fingernails raked a weathered cheek, and the old man nodded. "Stand out on the street. Goodwin might come along. Hard t'tell. Only runs when he needs money for a bottle."

Farley's mouth watered at the mention of a bottle. "Is that the best you can do?"

"Aye," said cataract eyes, glancing at the large clock. "That be the last train tonight. We're closing."

Gray clouds dimmed to black and windows yellowed with incandescent light as Farley waited for a cab, the wind whipping the tails of his worn trench coat.

After a while, a rusty Fairlane station wagon, brake pads screeching like fingernails on chalkboard, pulled up to the curb. Gratefully Farley hauled himself and his suitcase into the backseat.

Curious bloodshot eyes studied him in the rearview window. "Where to?"

Farley retrieved a scrap of paper from his trouser pocket and handed it to the driver. "Cost you now," said the driver. "Up front. It's a ways."

On the way out of town, the driver stopped at a liquor store. Farley's mouth watered as he watched the cabbie drink from the bottle hidden in a paper sack.

He looked away, out the window, the infrequent streetlight flashing on his blank face as they left the small town, his mind drifting back to the random happenstance that had brought him here....

"...You lost your job on *The Post* because of the booze."

Farley looked at the attorney's crossed legs beneath her tweed skirt and thought that what she needed was a good screwing. "You're Ralph Edwards and it's *This Is Your Life*, right?"

"Maybe Jay Leno could use you," she said sarcastically.

It was the second interview, and Farley was broke. "Why me?"

"You were a good journalist...before the bottle got you. Your name might still mean something to someone who has been out of touch. The pay's low. Our client is a recluse and requires a little class. Hell, no one would touch it."

"Flattery will get you everywhere."

The attorney yawned and uncrossed her legs. "Well?"

Farley went to the window and looked down on Times Square. His throat was dry, and he was thirsty. He turned. The good-looking attorney rekindled other needs.

His craggy face split in what he thought was a charming smile. "Let's discuss this over dinner."

"This is discrimination. You know that?" She looked as if she were sucking a lemon. "Because I'm a woman, they assigned this shit to me. I'm late for the Catskills. You want the job or not, Hagen?"

Farley decided she was a ballbuster.

Goodwin's cab left the few streetlights of Desoleville behind them. They were soon in the New England countryside. The moon peered from behind frequent clouds, bathing the forgotten vestiges of summer in its anemic light.

Farley glanced out the window at the fleeting moon. His mouth watered at the thought of sharing the contents of the anonymous paper sack with the cabby.

The cab turned off what Fagen thought was the main highway from town and bounced over potholes in the tarmac. Here the terrain rose into the hilly silhouette of nearly leafless trees, standing in stark reality of the rapidly changing seasons.

"You a relative?" the cabdriver asked.

"Pardon?"

"You the old lady's son, are ye?"

"No," said Farley, tearing his eyes from the brown sack and looking out the window at the flashing moon and the cloud-strewn sky.

The old Fairlane made another turn into a narrow lane. Ancient gnarled oaks cast a dappled umbrella over the passage.

"She don't have many visitors," said Goodwin, tilting the sacked bottle to his lips.

"Would you share?"

Goodwin's bloodshot eyes looked in the rearview mirror, and he handed the bottle over the seat back. He nodded in satisfaction as his passenger drank.

"Then you ain't a relative?"

"No, I'm here to do an interview."

"'Bout the husband she murdered?"

"She was never convicted." Farley tilted the bottle. The familiar fire trickled down his throat. It had been a long time. Too long.

"Hey, mate—it's my bottle! Pass it back."

The brown liquid warmed his insides, and Farley handed the bottle reluctantly over the seat.

The cab slowed and the moon came from behind a splotch of gray cloud. Farley saw the gabled silhouette of the huge house looming in the darkness, the tile roof slanting at a sharp angle toward the front.

Farley slapped a twenty into the outstretched palm of the cabdriver. "Hell, ye drank that much," said Goodwin, and floored his rusty Fairlane into the curtain of the night.

Farley stood on the stone threshold and banged the heavy knocker on the arched door. It sounded hollow, and he shivered. The thick stone walls muffled his knock, and he heard nothing but the fading echo of his inadequate arrival.

Suitcase in hand, Farley Hagen turned around. The shadowy landscape made him wish he were back in the Village in a warm pub with a bottle of Dewar's.

It was quiet and his eyes searched, looking for the phantoms of his imagination, finding nothing.

Farley turned back to the door. As he started to knock again, it opened, and he almost fell flat on his face.

He pushed his suitcase in front of him, staying the fall. He

stared at a pair of comely feet in patent leather pumps, thin straps hugging the gentle swell of stockinged ankles. His eyes moved up sloping calves to rounded knees peeking under starched petticoats.

"Mr. Hagen?"

Farley silently cursed the cabdriver and the cheap whiskey. His eyes moved past the ruffles, over the hem of the A-line skirt, to her narrow waist. The milky whiteness of her full breasts strained at the low-cut bodice of her uniform.

"Yes." His voice caught in his throat at the vision of loveliness framed in blond curls under a lace maid's cap.

"Follow me, please. You're expected." He saw the backs of her thighs as she started down the wide marble hall, lace petticoats flashing seductively.

Farley hurried after the young nymph, his cock bobbing to life in his trousers.

"Where?" Farley asked.

The maid looked over her shoulder, smiling sweetly, blonde curls bouncing as she walked. "To the terrace, Mr. Hagen. Ms. Tremaine is expecting you."

The maid's heels echoed in the wide hall and Farley hurried after her. His mind flashed with a brief macho fantasy: He knelt between her splayed legs, porking her with gusto. She cried for fulfillment, begging him to drill her deeply.

Douglas Fairbanks, perhaps?

Swinging from a velvet curtain, gleaming sword in hand.

Ready to foil the evil king's charges in Metrocolor and CinemaScope.

It had been so long.

His cock came to life.

The maid pushed open the French doors of the terrace, curt-sied, and waved him in.

Farley peered into the near-darkness beyond the stone patio. The shimmering rectangle of a pool wavered in the moonlight.

He turned. The maid was gone.

At first he didn't see her. She did not acknowledge his presence.

Tessa Tremaine sat in the oblong shadows of a fanned trellis, its decaying vines casting narrow shadows against her alabaster complexion.

Wrapped from head to toe in a dark velvet robe, only her face and slender neck were visible.

An ageless face, or so it seemed to Farley.

Her sapphire eyes settled on him and he shivered. A white hand unfolded from the cuff of her robe, gesturing, and he sat beside her.

"You're from the city?"

"The Big Apple, yes."

"My husband's kind of town."

Farley shivered in the cool night air.

"Do you get this view in New York?" she said, voice rasping like guitar picks on parchment.

"I never really noticed." He coughed into a curled fist.

"Neither did my husband. Perhaps the view is better in Hell, do you think?"

Her European accent was barely discernible. "I don't want to find out."

"Good." Her lips parted in a thin smile.

"Shall we start the interview now?" Farley said anxiously. "I have my recorder here in the suitcase."

"When we lived in the city, we read your column in the *Post*. We looked forward to it."

"Yes, well..."

"Drink?" Her hand curled around a crystal decanter, and she poured a generous amount into a stemmed glass.

"No, thank you."

Tessa Tremaine held the glass in front of him, the wide sleeve of her robe sliding down her slender arm, revealing soft white flesh. "Drink, it's eighty-year-old cognac."

"In that case," said Farley, accepting the snifter. How easy it was to fall into old habits, how sweet the taste. It made his head spin.

She smiled at him and crossed her legs. The thick velvet robe parted, falling away, revealing her bare leg in its slender symmetry. On her feet were flat sandals, the leather strap lodged

between her toes and winding around her ankles. Her red-tipped toes were the same blood red of her fingernails.

"You want to know if I killed my husband?" Her sapphire eyes bored into his.

"Well, yes. That's why I'm here. To tell your story."

Her slender hand found his knee and he wondered again how old she was.

"Yes," said Tessa Tremaine.

"Yes what?"

"Yes, I killed him."

Farley looked into her wide eyes and finished the cognac. End of story. Catch the next train back to New York.

She refilled his glass and her cool hand moved past his knee. The cognac warmed his stomach, and his cock throbbed. It had been so long.

She moved beside him and her robe parted farther, revealing the other white leg. She sipped cognac and smiled. "Do you want to tell my story, Mr. Hagen?"

Clouds scudded across the moon, casting the terrace in darkness. The night was still and the quiet loud.

"That's why I'm here."

"Not really," she whispered, lips close to his cheek.

"Do you have more cognac?"

"A cellar full." Her hand found his hard cock.

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" Farley said. "I never expected this."

Tessa Tremaine's cool hands were on his ears, bringing him to his knees before her spread legs.

A slight breeze stirred fallen leaves on the stone floor. Dry branches rasped in the hovering trees.

"Kiss me here, first."

His tongue was thick, his mouth as dry as moth wings. He turned over. His face rubbed something sweet smelling and slick. Cautiously, he opened one eye. The room was cast in shapeless shadows. He propped himself up on an elbow and opened the other eye. A sea of wine-colored satin sheets and large bed pillows surrounded him.

The urgent need to urinate gave Farley the courage to leave

the warm confines of the bed and its thick comforter. He stumbled around awkwardly in the darkness and was drawn to narrow needles of light seeping at the edges of a velvet curtain.

Farley parted the curtains. The light erupted in his eyes, sending mushrooms of pain to his throbbing head. He had been here before, and the worst was yet to come. The lingering effects of the cognac still dulled the destined reality of sobriety.

Backing from the light like a quick cockroach, Farley stumbled through the nearest door, miraculously finding the bathroom. He relieved himself and ran water in an oval basin, drinking cupped handfuls and spitting them out. He splashed cool water on his face.

There was no medicine cabinet in the antique bathroom and he opened a cupboard, hurriedly searching its contents.

Goddammit! Where is the ibuprofen?

Back in the bedroom, he found his suitcase, slipped on pants and a shirt, brushed his teeth, and went in search of pain relief.

The smell of bacon and fried potatoes led him down the wide spiral staircase, across marble-floored halls to the kitchen.

The maid, standing at the stove, looked over her shoulder.

"Mr. Hagen, how do you like your eggs?"

She looked even better today, but he was in a foul mood. "Fried."

Her smile seemed genuine. "You've slept late, sir. Would you like them over easy or sunny-side up?"

"What time is it?"

"Almost four. You must have had a trying journey reaching Desoleville."

"Ah... do we have any medication?"

"My name is Raylene, Mr. Hagen," she said and turned back to the stove, flipping potatoes. "Would a Valium do, sir?"

"That would do nicely, Raylene," Farley said and sat at a small table near a stained butcher's block. "Two, if you'd be so kind." What luck, he thought.

Farley watched her walk from the kitchen, slender legs peeking from under the short uniform, feet in narrow high heels. She

returned with two tablets and orange juice and poured him black coffee.

She went back to the stove, looked out a high, narrow window.

"Clouds are forming. It will storm tonight."

Soon before him were eggs sunny-side up, fried potatoes, and six strips of crisp bacon.

Farley ate ravenously. He looked at Raylene sitting on a stool across the kitchen, crossed legs revealed under her skirt. "How did you know I drink my coffee black?"

"Ms. Tremaine said so."

"She's not joining me this afternoon?"

"No, sir. She's been called into town on business. She requested that you dine with her tonight."

"Won't you join me?"

"No, thank you, sir."

"Quit calling me 'sir.'"

"Yes, sir."

Farley couldn't help noticing the maid's exposed legs under her uniform as she sat on the stool.

The events of last night were a fog in his memory, but he did remember kneeling between Tessa Tremaine's spread legs. He remembered his cheeks brushing the older woman's inner thighs. The cool flesh so close to the furnace of her sex had surprised him. As it turned out, Tessa Tremaine was completely naked under her velvet robe.

Farley did remember licking her, hearing her raspy words of encouragement as she held his head in place.

The cognac flowed, and the moon flitted behind wispy clouds. She massaged his penis through his trousers, teasing him while they drank. But the cognac had numbed his memory, and he could remember little else.

"Do I have a run, sir?"

"What?"

"You keep staring at my legs. Have I snagged a nylon?"

Farley blushed and mopped up egg yolk with a slice of toast. He wanted to fuck her.

"Are they too fat, sir?"

"I told you to quit calling me 'sir.' Is what too fat?"

"My legs, Mr. Hagen. Are they too fat?"

Farley looked into the blonde's beguiling blue eyes. "You have very attractive legs, Raylene."

She stood off the stool, cleared his plate from the small table, and refilled his cup. "Ms. Tremaine will be late, so dinner won't be served till after eight. Perhaps a nap would help your headache, Mr. Hagen."

After his nap Farley took a bath in the claw-footed oval bathtub. The room quickly clouded with steam and he rested his head on the curled headrest. He dozed.

A cool draft touched his face and arms. Farley opened his eyes.

Raylene stood near the tub, smiling as she unbuttoned the bodice of her uniform. She pushed the short dress off her shoulders and stepped out of it. Behind her back, she released the catch of her brassiere. Her large breasts sprang free.

Farley gasped at the size of her aureoles and thick nipples.

She pirouetted, displaying her stockinged legs. "I couldn't find a run." Her eyes danced mischievously.

"If we only had something to drink."

Raylene turned around, presenting her plump buttocks to his hungry gaze, the tiniest patch of fabric covering her secret parts. Off went her heels and, turning back, she held two glasses and a bottle. Over the edge of the tub, she came into the tepid water. "Will Dewar's suit?"

"But how did you know?"

"Ms. Tremaine told me," she said, immersing her stockinged legs in the tub. She turned on the tap, and soon hot water warmed them. Her hand found his cock. "I'm supposed to take care of your needs, Mr. Hagen."

"You're doing a commendable job," said Farley, his foot trailing along the inside of her leg, coming to rest against her panty-clad mound, toes tracing the generous lips of her vulva.

Raylene sighed and said, "We get so few visitors."

She released his cock and pushed aside her skimpy panties, moving the bottom of his foot squarely against the mound of her

pussy. Her foot found his hardness under the soapy water, and for several moments they played foot games.

"How does Ms. Tremaine know so much about me?" Farley asked.

Raylene moved his foot and scooted toward him until she captured his lance in both her hands, her breath warm on his cheek, her wide blue eyes sparkling. "You'll have to ask her, Mr. Hagen."

"I told you to quit calling—" Her lips silenced him. They were soft and he tasted her lipstick as her tongue invaded his mouth like a slippery serpent.

Farley cupped the melons of her breasts and fingered her nipples. He felt her stockinged legs slide over his thighs. Her hand held him as she engulfed his sex in the warm glove of her pussy.

Raylene broke the kiss and moved over him in smooth fluid motion, offering her breasts. Farley licked one large bumpy aureole and sucked her thick nipple into his mouth.

"You're so much better than my vibrator," she whispered to him. "I hope Ms. Tremaine doesn't keep you all to herself."

Something nagged at Farley's mind but her maddening motion over his hard penis made him forget it quickly. He thrust up into her tight, liquid cavern, meeting her hunching hips, sending waves of warm bathwater over the curled edge of the ornate tub.

The water boiled with their fucking, both of them soaring to a crescendo of passion. She held his head with her hands and their mouths parted, tongues dueling in lust.

Tiny spasms gripped his circumcised glans as her inner muscles hummed around his penis and they came, their sighs and cries filling the steamy bathroom.

After a late dinner, they sat in a small parlor off the dining room. Raylene never allowed their long-stemmed glasses to empty as they drank vintage burgundy. She served a rich mushroom soup, a small spinach salad, tender asparagus tips, and thick sizzling steaks. Tessa Tremaine ate her steaks rare, swimming in blood.

Later, in the parlor, she sat in a velvet armchair near a small fire. Farley sat in a matching chair on the other side of the wide stone hearth. The heavy curtains on the tall narrow windows were parted, rain stippling the square glass panes as distant thunder and lightning signaled the storm's arrival. The room was dark; the only light came from the fire and brief flashes of lightning.

Between them on a low table were brandy snifters and a crystal decanter of cognac. Farley set the small recorder down, pushed the voice-activated button, and poured for them both.

Long black hair, parted down the middle, fell in a single curl on either side of her narrow shoulders. A long-sleeved black silk blouse was tucked into a wide patent leather belt, the large silver buckle gleaming dully in the firelight. The top buttons of the blouse were open, and he clearly saw the imprint of her elongated nipples through the thin material. He remembered sucking those slim breasts the night before.

She wore a long button-front skirt and dark stockings, her slender legs fetchingly revealed above the knee, the last three buttons undone, falling away from her long legs. On her feet were open-toe, spaghetti-strap heels that crisscrossed over her vamp and wound around her thin ankles.

To Farley, the room was alive with an undercurrent of sexuality. He held the brandy snifter in his lap.

"About your husband, Ms. Tremaine?" he began.

She looked up from the flickering fire, her sapphire eyes shining in the half light. Her lips split in a narrow smile. "After last night, you may call me Tessa."

Farley shifted uneasily and drank cognac. "You told me you killed him."

"Yes."

"But you were acquitted."

"I had a good attorney." She watched him drink.

"It was a strange trial, as I remember."

"Yes. I was very ill at the time, and the court took that into consideration."

"You were hardly present in court." Farley reached back into his memory. He was at the *Post* at the time. Shortly after the

trial he had been fired, but the booze had fogged his recollection. "A disease...?"

"Yes."

Then he remembered and almost snapped his fingers. She had been brought to court wearing an ankle-length dress, a shawl, and sunglasses. There had been a picture of her in the paper. "Melanoma," he said. "The sun aggravates the cancer." He poured more eighty-year-old cognac into his snifter. She had hardly touched hers.

"Alcohol dulls the senses," she said, watching him drink. "It lowers a man's sexual release, and yet allows him to maintain his erection. Is that true?"

Her button-front skirt had slid back, revealing more of her thin legs in the dark stockings. Farley wondered if she were wearing a garter belt. "Well...I guess it affects us all differently."

"In your case Mr. Hagen, how does it affect you?"

What a brazen old lady. Obviously, they didn't do it last night and he wished he could remember more. "It affects me that way."

"Good. I want you to fuck me for a long time tonight."

Farley dabbed at the spilled cognac with his handkerchief and dropped his eyes from her bold stare. "About the trial..."

"It wasn't melanoma."

A brilliant flash of lightning flooded the room and a resounding clap of thunder rattled the windows. Her gaunt face and sapphire eyes were illuminated for a brief instant, almost like an x-ray. Farley shuddered and turned away. How could I have knelt between her legs and licked her last night, he thought; but when he looked up, the vision was gone. He wasn't used to all this fucking booze; it was giving him the D.T.'s.

"Then what was it if it wasn't melanoma?" he said, drinking cognac, knowing it was poison, unable to stop. One drink is too many, and a hundred are not enough.

"Lupus. It's in remission now. I've been very lucky."

"I don't know much about it."

"Neither do the doctors, Farley. Do you mind if I call you Farley?"

"Please do."

"Have you ever had trouble getting your breath, Farley?"

"Not that I can remember."

"Lupus does that to you sometimes. It attacks the skin and internal organs. The rashes and swelling were quite terrible during the trial. Exposure to the sun makes it worse, so I try to stay out of it." Her eyes softened, and he saw them glaze over for a moment. "I nearly died of it."

"Why did you kill your husband, the count?" he asked softly.

"The fool wasn't a count, but being a true countess, I made him one."

"Tremaine...it sounds so American."

"Names." She waved her hand in dismissal. "They mean nothing. I have gone by many names." She stared into the fire and sipped her cognac.

"He was a vagabond when I first met him. Today the term is 'entrepreneur.' I saw right through his debonair attitude, but fell victim to his oily tongue and handsome face. I was so lonely, and my father had sheltered me so.

"I first became aware of his infidelities in Copenhagen. Father had warned me. He was so immature but could he fuck..." She gave Hagen a thin smile. "I'm a very sexual person, Farley. You will enjoy my company."

Rain lashed at the high, narrow windows, and lightning flickered all about. Like some forties movie, it was a black-and-white scene that played before Farley's eyes.

"I ignored his indiscretions at first. His immaturity prevented me from bringing him into the family. Father forbade it, but I married him anyway. I caught him with *that* whore in Vienna. She taunted me." The fire flickered in her sapphire eyes as she looked at Hagen. "She taunts no more."

"Why didn't you just divorce him?" Some morbid details of the trial came back to Hagen, and he shivered in spite of the warm cognac in his stomach. He refilled his glass.

"I was smitten with him. He promised to do better...and sometimes he involved me in delicious games with his trollops. He had such a magnificent cock...."

What a wanton witch, thought Farley. "So you killed him."

"Yes, goddammit! I told you that before." Her thin nostrils flared and her cheeks almost bloomed with color.

So quick to anger, he thought. "There was morbid gossip during the trial. His body was never found. Rumors about dismemberment..."

Tessa Tremaine smiled across the hearth at her interviewer. "How could they convict me without evidence?"

"The letter with his fingerprints. The blood in the kitchen, on the knife and the carpenter's saw. It was his blood type."

"All circumstantial. My attorney was well paid. I was too frail for such behavior.

"After Munich and Hamburg, we came to the States, but the pattern continued. He'd lost interest in me. He flaunted his affairs. It was just too much."

Outside the mansion the storm raged.

Tessa Tremaine's cold sapphire orbs settled on Farley and she gave him a ghostly smile. "He was alive through most of it."

Farley needed to go to the bathroom and he wished he were back in New York.

The rain beat on the windows like tin darts. The wind whistled and the foul night came alive with the crackling of lightning and thunder.

Preoccupied with the night's ferocity, Farley missed her comment. "Pardon me, what did you say?"

"You don't have anyone."

"Is that a question?"

Gleaming sapphire eyes watched him over thin alabaster cheeks. She said nothing.

"I have a stepsister in California, but haven't heard from her in years. No, I don't have anyone."

"You're a lonely man."

Farley started to deny it but knew it would be futile. Sometimes his whole body ached with loneliness. "Yes."

"You'll like it here."

Farley drank cognac. "I'll be returning to the city tomorrow or the day after."

"I have a cellar full of cognac. Scotch, too."

"If you'd be so kind, you could send a bottle or two with me, after we complete the interview. I'll portray you as a victim, put you in good light."

"Light... It will be that soon enough."

"I need more details, Ms. Tremaine. To flesh out the story, so to speak."

"Nobody gives a damn about my story!" She stood and turned her back to the fire. "Drink your cognac, Farley."

Farley drank and looked away from her hypnotic eyes and chilly smile. He shivered.

He heard the whisper of silk and looked back. Her blouse was open, and she had pulled it loose from her wide belt. She unbuttoned the sleeves and shrugged out of it.

Tessa Tremaine's pale skin waxed wanly in the near darkness. Her small, sagging breasts sat high on her chest, the aureoles round as silver dollars, nipples thick and long.

Older—definitely older, and she eats too little, Farley thought, as he counted the ribs along her rib cage.

She unbuckled her belt and let it fall to the floor. Bony fingers worked on the buttons of her skirt until it fell away, becoming an indistinct shadow at her feet.

She is wearing a garter belt.

Dark nylons hugged her lanky legs, and her thin white thighs contrasted with the dark welt of her stocking tops. Her hips were framed by a black lace garter belt, and her sex was barely covered by the wispy triangle of her panties.

"Come," said Tessa Tremaine, and she started from the room. "Leave your clothes here. They won't be needed anymore."

Farley was up, stripping off his clothes, watching her small round ass move to the door.

She looked over her shoulder, shaking dark hair deftly from her face. "And bring the cognac."

On either side of the canopied bed were tall, narrow windows. The heavy drapes were open.

Farley lay on his back. Her stockinged knees hugged his hips as she rode him. Lightning flashes allowed him brief glimpses of her gaunt face through the curtain of her tousled hair. Her sapphire eyes almost gleamed with ecstasy, and her smile, revealing large teeth, was more like a wanton grimace. Tessa's hips bucked

on his shaft, and she balanced herself atop him by gripping him below the rib cage.

Her moist vagina held him tightly and he thrust up into her plunging pussy in almost-perfect harmony.

Tessa gathered her hair and entwined her fingers behind her neck, holding her bent elbows against her face. The gesture made her breasts appear younger. Her hips rose up and down on his manhood. "You can do better than that," she whispered in that odd, raspy voice. "You won't hurt me. Do it harder. I want to *feel* it."

Farley bucked his hips to meet her plunging pussy, his shaft gripped tightly, sliding deeper inside her moist and musky cavern. He held the sheet in his knotted fists. "I can't believe this," he said breathlessly. "A couple of days ago, I was as celibate as a Tibetan monk—and now I'm getting all the pussy I want."

"The best is yet to come."

Their coupled bodies convulsed on the bed.

"Speaking of coming... I'm very near. Are you...?"

"You go ahead, Farley," she hissed. "Don't wait for me, I'll get mine."

Farley didn't see her decadent smile as his head thrashed on the pillow. He lifted her, his body arching off the mattress, his balls boiling in release.

Farley gritted his teeth and his head came up, veins defined like ropes on his neck.

A tremendous flash of lightning lit the room.

Farley stared up into her gleaming sapphire orbs, his eyes going wide in wonder. She licked her lips and her fanged teeth shone luminous as she bent over his face and bit into his neck.

The crash of thunder shook the house and the windowpanes and drowned out his scream.

The full moon waxed brightly in the clear night sky. Tessa Tremaine reclined in the ornate chaise longue. Her velvet robe was open, draping under her arms on either side of her naked body.

Raylene put a decanter of dark wine beside her and sat in a nearby chair. "The air is so much fresher the night after a storm. Be careful not to take too much," Raylene said softly. "It is unusually bright tonight."

"Yes, I keep forgetting that it is a reflection of the sun." Tessa cupped her firm young breasts. "They look so much better now, don't you think?"

Raylene looked at her employer. It was a younger face and body. "Yes, a pencil would not stay under them."

"You're so loyal, Raylene. Do you still miss my father?"

"Not as much," Raylene sighed, "but I still think of him. He was such a wonderful lover."

"We will share this one."

"Do you think he will take, ma'am?"

"We should know soon enough. He may be in the cellar looting our cache of expensive cognac this very moment."

Raylene smiled shyly. "His equipment is quite impressive. I hope he survives."

"I drank only a little," said Tessa. "Damn Grandfather! He wouldn't make Grandmother one of us. It's all his fault."

"But you've done quite well as half—"

"—Thanks to his blood." Tessa held her wineglass in a toast. "Do you think Farley will like the new, younger me?" she asked.

"Oh, my, yes," Raylene said. "Do you think he knew?"

"He bought the story about lupus. Not till the very last, as he was coming. The terror in his eyes was fetching. It sent me over the edge, a most delicious climax."

"I certainly hope he wakes from his *sleep*," said Raylene, her brow wrinkled with concern.

"If not," said Tessa Tremaine in her cold, raspy voice, "we'll have to dust off the shovels and put him with the rest of *them*."

GAMES

LUCY TAYLOR

Sitting slumped in the chair across from him, Emma Perez looked like a prisoner of war. In a sense, she was one, Cheever thought. And he wondered why she couldn't sit just a little straighter, put some life in her gaze, because if she did even that much to show she wasn't altogether broken, it might change her future.

Maybe.

"Did you write anything down for me this week, Emma?"

Shrugging, she looked like one of those survivors of some natural calamity one sees on the news, a microphone stuck under their mouths as they wander about the ruins of what used to be their home, searching for the bodies of their children, and the reporter's question always the same: "How do you feel?"

"Emma, did you—?"

"I don't like writing stuff down, doctor. Makes it too real. Are you mad?"

"No, Emma, I'm not mad. Next time, then. Next time you'll write out more of what you remember."

Cheever riffled through the file that contained his notes from

previous sessions, test results from the MMPI and Rorschachs, newspaper accounts, meticulously clipped.

An editorial in the *Miami Herald* had called Emma Perez "every woman's nightmare." A tabloid sleaze sheet, less circumspect, had screamed in caps beneath a photo of Emma leaving the Miami courthouse on her attorney's arm, a wide-brimmed sun hat tilted low over her face: PEREZ WATCHED AS LOVER STRANGLED TEEN.

Funny, Horace Cheever thought, for all the luridness surrounding her, how discount-rack ordinary Emma seemed, in her cheap Kmart frock and sandals, her oversized purse decorated with seashells and glitter. Guilty of bad taste but little else. Her black hair was tied back loosely off shoulders as smooth and bone-white as the angel's-wing shells on her bag. Her nose, if you really studied it, looked flatter than it should below the bridge, and a scar over one eye bisected the jet brow like summer lightning slashing a starless sky. But Cheever judged these defects minor. On the other hand, she was still quite young, just twenty-three, and seemed to be the kind of woman destined to go to seed early, a voluptuous peasant who would peak physically at twenty-five and hit late middle age and two hundred pounds along about age thirty. She had even put on weight since Cheever had met her, the pudginess nudging out the waistband of her dress below disproportionately large breasts.

Sometimes Cheever hated his sessions with Emma. She tended to repeat herself, to ramble. She was vague and inappropriately submissive. And sometimes he looked forward to seeing her for just those reasons, for her unabashed servility and the way she looked at him at times, furtive, eyes downcast—as if he were another like Ramon, and she feared his words, his teeth, his fists. Sometimes he tried to pretend he was behind a one-way glass watching himself interview Emma. Anything to distance himself from her, from the potent reek of her over-spiced floral cologne, her threadbare glamour, her neediness, her—heat.

He glanced again at his notes from their last session and lit a cigarette. Emma didn't smoke but didn't mind if he did. After all, Ramon smoked.

"Emma, you told me you and Ramon went to lesbian bars

to pick up women. Wasn't this difficult? Why would a lesbian want to have sex with Ramon?"

Emma gave a tiny breathy giggle, like the stutter of dry air through asthmatic lungs.

"A dyke wouldn't, I guess. But a lot of the women who go to those bars are bi. A lot of women are curious and want to try—what did Ramon call it?—a different flavor-of-the-month. So I'd approach the woman alone, and later on I'd introduce her to Ramon and ask if she'd do him, too."

"But you didn't ask Toni Gibbs how she felt about it, did you? Not until you got her in the house and in bed, and Ramon came in and started raping her."

"At El Goya, where I picked her up, she seemed pretty wild. She was high on coke. I thought she'd do Ramon—no problem."

"Not even when she saw him and started screaming? Begging you to let her leave?"

"It was too late then. Ramon had her. What could I have done?"

"She was a teenager, Emma. Fifteen. She was in way over her head. She wanted to leave."

"At that point, she belonged to Ramon. If I'd said anything, tried to stop it... I wouldn't have dared."

"Would he have hurt you?"

"Not then, but later. He'd've thought up something new. Some new game."

That weird, drugged-out look that Cheever had seen before filled her eyes like dense smoke. As if a cobra had risen up in some mental cranny and she was following its sway, blissful, mesmerized.

"What were the games like, Emma?"

"All different. Fun ones, mean ones. Some hurt more than others."

"Tell me."

"He used to make me stay all night under the covers sometimes—with my—with his penis in my mouth—"

"His erect penis?"

"No, no, of course not, Dr. Cheever. Not even Ramon could...it

would be soft by then, but he'd make me sleep with it in my mouth. My little cockwarmer, he called me. I liked doing that."

"But you told me once you nearly suffocated."

"Yes. Well, one time, he got my head between his thighs, and, he was asleep, you see, and his thighs were very muscular and heavy—Ramon lifted weights—I couldn't breathe, and then, he wouldn't wake up or he pretended not to. His legs clamped down around my neck. I thought I was going to die."

Cheever scribbled in his notes. "What else?"

"He'd tie me to the bed sometimes and leave and be gone for hours. I never knew if he was coming back or not. Once I—I wet the bed, and he laughed at me. Another time he brought back a man with him—a black man—and made him do it to me."

"Forced him?"

"Ramon was drunk. He hated blacks. Despised them. His brother dated black women, you know, and Ramon would never say that brother's name again. But he had a gun, a Ruger .257, and he held it on the man and made him fuck me. The guy wanted to use a condom—he thought I was a hooker—but Ramon said no, and later he told the man that I had AIDS, that my pussy was full of sores."

"Have you been tested for HIV?"

"Twice. Negative both times."

"Thank God."

"Ramon only did that the one time. Made me have sex with someone else. Most times, he was very jealous."

"Was he jealous when he broke your nose?"

"No. No, he was mad because when I paid the phone bill, I turned the bill in backwards by mistake, so instead of Southern Bell's address in the little window, it was Ramon's and the bill came back, of course. I should have looked. I should have checked, he said."

"Anyway, he told me he was going to teach me how to box. He'd done that, you know. In real life. In the navy. And he put these gloves on me and pretended to show me jabs and thrusts, but it was just an excuse to hit me, and I was scared to death. I could hardly hold my arms up. And when I didn't fight back he screamed at me and hit me. He knocked out three of my teeth."

I wear a bridge now, but I don't think you can tell. You can't tell, can you, doctor?"

She pulled her lips back, an awful, simian grimace. The bridge was obvious, several shades too white. Cheever said her teeth looked fine.

"He broke my nose, too. After that, he started hitting me where you couldn't see the damage. He said I embarrassed him, with my face all bruised. People would ask if I was in a car accident, look at me funny. Ramon hated that."

"Did he hit Toni Gibbs?"

"Oh, no, he wouldn't have done that. He didn't want any trouble with the law. He didn't want her messed up."

"He killed her."

"Like I told the court, it was an accident."

"But he choked her, Emma. While you looked on."

"It was a game. We'd done it before. It didn't even hurt."

"Being strangled?"

"Not if it's done the right way." She tilted her throat back, used her hand to demonstrate. Her neck was very long and white; Modigliani would have loved her as a model. Cheever watched the way her hand moved on her own throat, up-down, as if she were masturbating an immensely thick cock of putrescent whiteness. He scrawled something in his notebook, so shaky and illegible that he doubted if later he could read what he had written.

Emma spoke as if she were giving a recipe for pie crust.

"What you don't want to do, see, is crush the larynx. But you get the person here, up under the jawbone, all you're doing, see, is cutting off blood to the brain. So you feel woozy—like real good dope—and it's very sexy, very sensual, and you want to fuck the whole wide world, and then you become unconscious."

"Or dead."

"I told you, that wasn't supposed to happen. Ramon did it to me like that lots of times. He said he used to fantasize about having sex with an unconscious woman. One who couldn't look at him or move or make noise. He said it was the best sex because he had the woman's body, but it was private, too, like jerking off. It gave him complete control."

"When did you realize she was dead?"

"I got scared when she didn't wake up right away. I mean, she was out for too long. I wanted to call an ambulance then, but Ramon—Ramon said not yet, he said you haven't done your duties yet."

"Your duties. Meaning?"

A flush crept into her pallid cheeks. The scar across her eyebrow was as white as a splinter of bone. Other scars, he knew, marked her body like exotic tattoos, the ritual cuttings of some primitive tribe. Some of them Cheever had glimpsed, at the edge of a hemline or when she adjusted the strap of a sundress; she had described others.

"Duties meant, you know, make love."

"Make love. He wanted to have intercourse with you while this young girl lay dead or dying, and you let him. You didn't call the ambulance because it would have been against his wishes. You didn't protest or scream or fight?"

An edge, hard and narrow as the crease in a well-starched shirt, jagged Cheever's voice. Emma, who picked up on anger like an animal sensing an impending earthquake, seemed Velcroed to her chair. Her large eyes took on that opaque sheen Cheever associated with the initial murky steps toward catatonia. He cursed himself. How unprofessional to show his outrage. She was here for help, not judgment.

"I'm sorry, Emma. I didn't mean to raise my voice."

She blinked. Light filtered back into her eyes, but slowly, with less luster than before. Light and fear—and something else, which Cheever could not identify but beside which he placed a mental asterisk.

"I couldn't say no when Ramon wanted sex. You don't understand, doctor. It wasn't allowed. 'No' was *not* allowed."

"At what point did you call the ambulance, then?"

"The next morning, when I tried to get her up. I thought she'd only fallen asleep on the floor. I...I'd forgotten about the choking. And when I couldn't wake her up, when I saw how cold she was—"

"Dead."

"Dead. Yes. But I called the ambulance anyway."

"Where was Ramon?"

"Sleeping. He always slept late. His classes were all in the afternoon. That was in his contract, I think, with FAU. He was considered the best in the economics department, and he had tenure, so—but you're not interested in that, in Ramon's career, are you?"

"Do you feel guilty, Emma? Remorseful?"

"It was an accident. Ramon didn't mean to kill that girl. And I was only doing what I had to do, to please him."

"The night before, you'd had sex with her, too, before she died? Isn't that right?"

She crossed her legs, uncrossed them, raked absently at her shell and rhinestone purse. There was glitter and a red rhinestone under one of her nails. "What time is it, doctor? How much more of this do we have to—?"

"Please, Emma. Answer the question."

"But what difference—?"

"Emma."

"Yes. I used a dildo that straps on around the hips. I did her while Ramon sat on her shoulders and made her suck his cock. She was narrow inside. There was blood on the dildo when I pulled it out. I didn't like it."

"Because you didn't like hurting her?"

Again, the giggle, fluty with embarrassment, the shocked delight of a child when an adult breaks wind.

"Because it grossed me out. Besides, I was jealous of her. On her back, with Ramon's cock down her throat so far his balls bounced off her lips. I wanted that, too. With Ramon, you see, it wasn't all bad. Even the discipline felt good after a while."

"How often did Ramon beat you?"

"Not beat—discipline."

"How often?"

"Whenever I needed it. Usually when we were making love. And sometimes, if I asked him to."

"You mean you initiated punishment yourself?"

The light in her eyes seemed to flicker again, diminish.

"It's all right, Emma."

"You won't like it, doctor."

"It doesn't matter."

"Without the discipline I felt, you know, dead. Numb. When I felt pain, at least I was feeling something. So I asked him to do things sometimes—"

"What things, Emma?"

She gave a desultory shrug, as if a leaden cloak freighted her shoulders.

"I don't—I can't always remember good."

"How are you feeling, Emma?"

"Most of the time I feel—dead. I feel like I'm not really here. Like—like a balloon."

"A balloon?"

"You ever see a kid with a balloon who lets go of the string, and the balloon lifts up and the kid cries. Imagine being that balloon. Just floating on forever with nothin' to hold you down. It's an awful feeling, doctor, like dying all the time, but never being dead. This endless emptiness, like the inside of a balloon. Like, if someone stuck a pin in me I'd burst and disappear."

"What do you do now, Emma, now that Ramon's in prison?"

She fiddled with the strap of her dress. Something blue and faded, like a tiny swatch of denim, peaked into view. A bruise, thought Cheever, momentarily alarmed before he realized it was just her tattoo. The tattoo of Ramon's initials above her breast.

She caught him looking, smiled self-consciously, like a little girl caught hiking up her skirt. Such big breasts on such a narrow torso, Cheever thought. Her back must hurt, from the sheer weight of flesh—from that and when Ramon used to whip her. She had told him that, hadn't she? He jotted something down.

She resumed speaking, but now her voice was fainter, breathy, an angel on Quaaludes.

"I haven't found any work yet. I been to some temp agencies, but too many people, they seen my picture in the paper. They say awful things to me or they feel sorry for me, which is worse. Like I'm some kind of freak. The women are the worst. They act like I got somethin' awful, somethin' catchin'. Mama helps me some. She asks why I don't find a man to help me. I never been without a man before. I feel naked now, like my skin's scraped off.

"But I had an idea, you know, I been thinking..."

"Go on."

"Maybe what I need, you know, is to get pregnant. A baby—that might have made it better between me and Ramon."

"A child!?"

Images of Emma pregnant—a benighted Mary, a muddled Madonna—brought Cheever close to shivering. That was what was wrong with the world now, all the sick, twisted people having children, passing on their craziness, their cruelties, as casually as if they were handing down the genes for slim thighs or brown hair. Why, even in the best of families a child could be a terrible mistake—Cheever often thought that he was fortunate to have the balance, the emotional stability he did when his own parents, in his estimation, with their rigid discipline, their humiliations, grand and petty, weren't fit to have raised dogs.

"You aren't well enough to have a baby, Emma. Besides, you told me you weren't seeing anyone."

"Not now."

"Then...?"

"Ramon is going to be paroled soon. It was an accident, you know, I testified to that, and he had no prior record. There were lots of character witnesses from the university. I'm waiting for him. We'll have a baby, and this time it'll be better. I'll make Ramon happy. I'll let him discipline me, but not the baby."

"You can't, Emma. That's—what you're thinking of, that's unspeakable."

"You're mad, aren't you?"

Cheever blotted oily sweat from his forehead. Emma shifted her weight, breasts swaying pendulously beneath her dress. Her skin was so pale that Cheever could see the pulse in it—appalling even to contemplate the bruises that could be produced on such porcelain skin, black flowers on alabaster.

"You didn't tell me you were in touch with Ramon."

"He's my husband, doctor."

"Common-law."

"My husband. I dream about him all the time. I wake up calling his name, crying. Sometimes—is this possible, doctor? Can a woman, you know, do like a man and come when she's asleep?"

"A wet dream? Yes. It's less common in women, but it happens."

"And sometimes, asleep, I can feel Ramon inside me and taste him, and I never want to wake up. It's like if someone put a pillow over your face to smother you, you'd sell your soul just to get that pillow off, just for that next breath of air."

"You agreed, I thought, to have no further contact with him."

"You didn't tell me it would hurt this much. It's like I'm disconnected, like I'm disappearing a little more every day without Ramon. When I'm by myself, it's like nobody's there."

"You've called him?"

"A few times."

"Written letters?"

"Don't be mad, doctor."

"Visits?"

"No. The newspapers, you know. I'm afraid. Everyone thinks I'm this awful person. The stories I've read about me. The letters I get. Sometimes I wish I could just go down to Mexico or South America, somewhere nobody's ever heard of me. But I got to wait til Ramon gets out."

"Which will be?"

"A few more months. He told me on the phone his social worker likes him. He says she's old and fat and horny. Ramon says if he gets the chance..." The vacancy returned to her eyes, like pools of water slowly spiraling down a drain, like someone being hypnotized by a faraway chant, a wolfen cry.

Cheever took a deep breath. This mattered.

"Does Ramon know how to find you?"

"Yes."

Control, Cheever reminded himself. Control. He wanted to scream, to shout at this young woman, pound some sense of self-preservation into her head, even if he had to do it with nails and a drill bit. She'd been beaten, brutalized, humiliated in every possible way, a teenaged girl killed before her eyes, and yet she said it like the most natural thing in the world—of course, this sadist knows where I live; of course, I want to be with him and have his child.

"Emma, you must never see Ramon again. If you do, you probably won't survive it."

"I don't want to survive without him."

"Emma, do you trust me?"

"Yes, but—"

"You need protection. From yourself and your obsession. If you won't break contact with Ramon, someone must help you do it. You've got to stay away from him."

"I know, I know, doctor, but don't tell me to go to one of those halfway houses, those battered women's shelters. They'd blame me for that woman's death. Besides, I wasn't a battered woman. It was just games."

"Emma, I know a place for you. It's on a lakefront up near Mount Dora. Very isolated, no phone. Ramon will never find you there."

"I don't know, doctor. I feel like I'm crumbling inside. Disappearing."

"That's your sickness talking. That's why you're here, what I'm treating you for."

"I'm afraid." She hugged herself, shivering. "Without Ramon—"

"You can live without him, Emma. I'm going to prove it to you."

Cheever got up and slipped his jacket over those pale, freckled shoulders, the tendrils of black hair like the petals of some funereal rose. His hands trembled. Control. Such white skin, such black hair. An illustration from a fairy tale. Put her in a crimson dress or under scarlet satin sheets, bright red to make the image perfect.

Blood red.

It was time now.

He'd been preparing the summerhouse for Emma almost since he first read about her, since he told Emma's caseworker he'd treat her gratis, as part of his research into dependent personality syndrome.

The house was perfect now.

Whips, manacles, handcuffs, studded gloves. Instruments of torture to make an Inquisitor dance with glee. A few surprises not even Ramon had thought of.

Everything he needed to make her forget about Ramon.

To make her need only *him*.

He knew she would enjoy it.



METAL FATIGUE

NANCY KILPATRICK

Iron talons slid down his spine, slicing skin the way a wire cuts cheese. Marvin cried out. He couldn't figure out why he had a hard-on. If the restraints had allowed it, he'd have twisted to safety. Hell, he would have been out of here!

It was like this every time he had sex with the aliens. They made it seem like a great idea, until Marvin was bound, trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey.

Facedown, his knees had been bent back at a weird, uncomfortable angle to make his legs stick up and cross over the top of his ass like drumsticks. The aliens pinned his arms to his sides like bird wings. He rested only on his belly, his lower half off the bed, head pulled up and far back, mouth forced open, balls and erect cock dangling, asshole exposed for stuffing.

He'd been plucked and basted and knew he was about to be microwaved.

His body trembled. They never went on past daylight, so it couldn't last much longer. They had to get back to their home planet and gear up for the next time they came down here and

seduced guys like him. Regular guys with jobs and wives and kids and mortgage payments.

One of the aliens stood directly over his face. Marvin looked up at the rigid steel pole of a cock and the silver cunthole. They were all hermaphrodites, so he never knew what he was going to get or have to give. This one told Marvin telepathically it wanted his tongue. One behind him was about to use his nethermouth for a receptacle. A third, below, took the whole of his genitals into its liquid metal trap. Bound the way he was, Marvin could only enter and be entered and be entered upon. He could only submit.

He slid into the icy cave and opened to the frozen stalactite while a glacier formed at his groin. Their hot ice scared him from three directions until the crushing cold tore through his body and collided, and he screamed.

Marvin swallowed coffee and said to Rita's back, "It happened again."

His genitals and rectum were raw, the corners of his mouth split from being stretched to the limit. They had cut the flesh over his backbone to insert the little radio transmitters along his vertebrae so they could keep track of him. His back pulsed with pain.

Rita flipped his eggs and said nothing. The terry cloth bathrobe hid most of her shape, which had gotten larger over the years. Strands of fading brown hair clung to the nubby fabric at her shoulders. She was no sex goddess, but she was a good woman. She shouldn't have to put up with a husband who fornicates with aliens, even if it was against his will. Or partially so. "They came for me again. Used me all over. Like the other times."

She slid the eggs onto a plate with the toast, already buttered, and placed it before him, then got herself a mug of coffee. "I'm sore," he said.

"There are no aliens." Her voice was even, like she was talking to one of the kids, stating the way things were, the way they would be. She opened the refrigerator and took out a carton of half-and-half.

"They put things in me. In my backbone. So they can track me."

She pulled his collar behind him and looked down his work shirt at his back. "No marks," she said, taking a seat.

"The marks are invisible. You know that."

"You dreamed it. Like the last time."

"It happened."

"You'll be late for your shift." She sipped her coffee.

Down at the factory, Marvin assumed his position on the production line. The continuous-motion silver machines clanked and banged, sending an eternal series of hollow metal tubes with holes drilled through each side along the conveyor belt at his left, and on the other belt at his right, threaded eight-inch poles. A plastic bin to the back of his work station contained wing nuts. With his left hand, he took a tube and with his right a pole. Automatically, he impaled the tube with the pole as far as it would go before it got too thick. He slipped a wing nut over the tip of the pole and spun it down the threads, making sure the pole and tube were bound together securely. He inserted the whole thing into a gaping metal hole above his head that mechanically fused the parts. Even that brief second of staring up caused the brilliant florescent tubes in the ceiling to blind him temporarily. Vision blurred, he laid the tool on a third conveyor belt running perpendicular to the other two, at crotch level.

He picked up a new tube and impaled it with a new pole, and repeated the process for the next eight hours. Marvin left his station to another man, who took the next shift, who would leave it to another who would work his shift, then Marvin would return.

It was endless.

When Marvin got home from work that night, Rita was sitting on the couch watching the tail end of Geraldo. "When's dinner?" he asked.

"Fifteen minutes," she said, her eyes never leaving the TV.

Marvin decided on a shower. The hot water beat down on his back, tapping the invisible scar tissue along his spine. He wondered if the aliens were getting static on their receivers.

After last night, he felt nervous. They had never been with him

so long before and he was scared. He couldn't tell when they would come again. They never came two nights in a row, but then again, they had never implanted transmitters into his body before either.

After fried farmer's sausages, french fries, and canned sweet peas, he and Rita watched TV and finished off a tub of Neapolitan ice cream, then went to bed and watched some more TV. Rita fell asleep around 11:00, facing him, but Marvin lay awake at 2:00 A.M., listening to the white noise of the dead station, staring out the window at the night sky.

If they came for him they would fuck him again all night long. The way they fucked was mechanical, poles ramming in and out like pistons, metal mouths clamping tight and opening around him with precision timing. It was painful. Damn painful.

Rita snored and the noise irritated him. He nudged her until she turned over and the snoring stopped.

How could you hate something and, at the same time need it? Marvin wondered. He had no idea why the aliens came here, why they had picked him. They never talked to him, just screwed him until his brain turned to molten steel, ready to be bent any way they wanted.

Rita farted, a long slow one in her sleep. He wondered what it would be like to enter her behind. It had never happened in all the years of their marriage. Rita wasn't like that. Back when they still used to do it regularly, she liked him on top, face to face, nothing kinky either, like in the mouth or the butt. And she liked it in the dark, too, unlike the aliens. They wanted all the lights blazing. Maybe on their planet, wherever that was, it was light all the time, probably white light, like those damn fluorescents. That's why they had quicksilver eyes, from absorbing all that light.

Wind blew the curtains into the room and Marvin trembled. This was their sign. That they were coming. Or maybe it was just a breeze. He didn't know anymore. There were signs everywhere. All the time. On the TV tonight there'd been a preview for a show about UFOs and Rita had turned to him and said, "Up your alley." He didn't know what she meant by that remark. Was it some kind of sexual come on? His alley? His anus? Then

she'd licked the back of the spoon she ate her ice cream with, her long, fat, pink tongue dragging slowly over the smooth silver metal.

"Marvin!"

The liquid silver voice sliced down his spine. His muscles tensed. The curtains blew wildly and the air chilled.

He wanted to run, to get outside, to find a place in nature where he could hide. He had this idea: if he could just make it into the woods, far from everything mechanical, and root himself to the earth like a tree, if he could just get out of here....

But he couldn't move. His backbone felt glued to the sheet and the sheet to the mattress. The bed under him rocked, the table, lamp, the TV. It was as though he had been caught in an avalanche. Rita, dead to the world, didn't wake when he shook her. He tried to yell, but they'd gotten his voice again. He was mute. Paralyzed. Suddenly all movement stopped. All sound. Silence pierced his eardrums—that was their language, silence, they spoke it on their planet. The language of death.

Marvin watched helpless as the first silver shadow slid through the half-inch opening of the window. Its rod penis stood erect. It was always erect. Quicksilver dripped from the hole between its legs. The alien was otherwise featureless, by every standard Marvin knew. It had arms and legs, but they seemed useless. They used them only to tie Marvin up in their invisible wires; then it was all fucking.

Soon the room was crammed with glittering translucent beings. They filled every inch of floor space and then stood on top of the dresser and the TV and the bed. The room shimmered silver. The air grew cold but dense, as if much of it had turned to ice crystals.

Even if he could have moved, there was no way to get past them. And even if he could, and he knew from trying that he could not, there was nowhere to go. The clock had stopped at 3:15. There was nothing to do but assume the position. Reading his mind, they permitted this minimal movement. He turned onto his stomach and bent his knees until they were chest level, butt hanging over the edge of the bed. It would be less painful if he let them enter him, rather than fighting them and losing.

Already his cock was hard, and he hated this power they had over him.

He lay there for the longest time on his belly, waiting, but nothing happened. They still clogged the room, a silent forest of metal. But this was unusual. He felt edgy. Whatever they were up to, he guessed he wouldn't like it, at least later on.

Suddenly Rita moaned. Two of the aliens turned her and another lifted her flannelette nightgown over her head.

No! Marvin shouted, unable to move now; they had frozen him. He watched, horrified, as the steel beings wrapped his wife in the invisible wires, arms folded at her sides like wings, ankles pulled over her ass and crossed like drumsticks.

When her head was back and her mouth pried open, they woke her. Her eyes darted about as her body struggled to move from a position that left no options. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Marvin; he picked up her silent plea for protection. But Marvin could not help her. He couldn't help himself.

He steeled himself, knowing he would soon witness the violation of his wife in every orifice by these perverted creatures. They had no feelings. They were perpetual motion machines, pounding in and out, in eight-hour shifts, relentless. He waited, terrified. Rita waited. Nothing. This was so unlike them, to hesitate. They operate automatically, without thought, obeying silent commands, he thought. What could they be waiting for?

Suddenly Marvin felt the individual vertebrae of his backbone come alive. Each one was tapped in sequence, from his neck to the end of his spine, then back up again. He felt like a xylophone being played, but he didn't recognize the tune, only that the notes went up and down.

His body was free and yet not free. He moved, but not of his own will, and only where they willed him to move. He jerked, a puppet pulled by invisible strings. On his back, the scale was repeated, endlessly, bone by bone. He wondered now if they had planted more than transmitters.

Marvin was on his knees, but they made him stand on the floor. He was crushed by cold silver life forms. Erect metal rods prodded him from all sides. Against his will, his penis swelled. He was jerked and nudged and goaded until his genitals hovered

behind Rita. He looked down and saw his cold metal penis, hard as steel, and below, Rita's hot inferno waiting to melt it.

Tied the way she was, her orifices exposed, she had no choice but to submit. He slid deep into her furnace. A tear trickled down the side of her face, but he soon forgot about it. He thrust in and out like a piston, oblivious to her needs and wants, bent only on getting the job done. It would be a long shift. Five more hours to go. There were so many holes to fill with his steel rod. The job was endless.



THE KNOCKOUT

O'NEIL, DE NOUX

Pausing just inside the door of Morning Call Coffee Stand, the long-legged girl shifted her weight from her right leg to her left and scanned the well-lit café. Joseph Perrier, seated at the center marble counter, put his coffee cut down and stared at her. When the girl's gaze met his, he tried his best to look as if he wasn't staring. The girl, moving smoothly in her spiked heels, eased over and sat on the stool next to Joseph Perrier. He nervously took another sip of coffee.

She was a knockout, a sultry brunette in a white silk blouse and a tight black skirt. The blouse was thin and clingy, revealing the outline of a low-cut bra beneath, and there was a generous slit up the front of the skirt. Sitting next to Joseph, she placed her small purse on the counter top next to his keys and ordered a café-au-lait from an eager waiter with frizzy hair and leering eyes.

She crossed her legs, readjusting herself on the stool. Joseph stole glances at her. A centerfold body, he thought to himself, small waist, round hips and breasts bulging against the buttons of her blouse. He could feel his heart racing as the girl reapplied

dark lipstick to her full, pouty lips. Then she looked at him, batted her dark blue eyes, and smiled.

Joseph looked away quickly. He cupped his jaw in the palm of his hand to hide his weak chin and reached for his cup. For the thousandth time, he wished he could grow a beard that would hide his chin. He felt his heart beating in his ears. He took a nervous sip and put the cup down just as the girl next to him leaned over and in a velvety voice said, "Hi, Joe."

His stomach bottomed out. He slowly turned to face her.

"Do I know you?" he croaked and quickly cleared his throat.

"You know all about me," she answered with a wink. "You know the story of my life."

The waiter arrived with her coffee. Grinning at the girl, the waiter gave her a big smile before withdrawing. As soon as they were alone again, an impish look came upon the girl's face.

"You know how I like surprises," she said.

Joseph couldn't speak. Suddenly he felt dizzy.

She leaned an elbow on the counter and rested her chin in the open palm of her hand and said, "You're such a kidder, Joe. Don't you recognize me?"

He shook his head no.

"I'm Julia. Julia Carondelet." She picked up her cup and took a sip. "From the book. You know."

Joseph Perrier, New Orleans' most acerbic book critic, suddenly felt dizzy. A half hour earlier he'd mailed in his latest review, dropping it at the post office next door before stopping at Morning Call for a nice steamy cup. The book he reviewed featured a sultry brunette named Julia Carondelet. Honest to Christ!

He felt his mouth hanging open. He closed it. His throat was so dry he couldn't swallow. Staring into those blue eyes, he felt goose bumps along his neck and back.

She leaned closer and whispered, "I'm so glad you're surprised."

His heart was running now. He could feel it pounding. Julia Carondelet? He had to be losing his mind. He almost jumped when he felt her fingernails moving up his arm.

"You can't imagine how happy I am to be here with you," she said. "A clever man is hard to find."

He reached for the glass of water next to his cup and downed it in one gulp, but his throat still felt like a dust bowl.

She moved her lips next to his ear and whispered, "Take me home, Joe. I want to make love to you." Then she kissed him gently on the earlobe. Her rich perfume seemed intoxicating. "You know, I always tell the truth."

Joseph closed his eyes.

"Would you do something for me?" she asked in a voice meant for the bedroom. "Would you kiss me?"

Joseph was leaning so far back, he almost tumbled from the stool. He was breathing heavily now. He pulled a five-dollar bill from his pocket nervously, tossed it on the counter, and left the café. He was outside before he realized his keys were still on the counter.

He heard the café door swing open behind him and heard the tinkle of keys.

"You forgot something," she said. Her breasts were pointing at him like a brace of loaded cannon. "I'll make a deal with you," she added. "I'll give you the keys. You take me home."

In the car, she said nothing at first. She just leaned against the passenger door and watched him. When she crossed her legs, causing the slit to rise high on her thigh, he could hear the sound of nylon brushing against nylon. God, she was gorgeous!

"Turn here," she finally said, after they'd stopped at a red light.

"But I live that way."

"Turn here."

Two red lights later, she nodded to a street sign on the corner and said, "Does that look familiar?"

He read the street sign and the pins on the back of his neck turned to needles. One side of the street sign read: Julia. The other side read: Carondelet.

The light turned green but he didn't move. Still staring at the signs, he said, "I don't get this."

"I'm lonely, Joseph," she said in a voice suddenly sad. "Even pretty girls get lonely. Take me home."

He flipped the lights on in his modest town house and stood awkwardly in the center of the living room. She moved up to him, placed her right hand on his shoulder, and reached down with her left to remove her high heels.

When she began to unbutton her blouse, he moved a hand upward slowly, stopping a half inch from her right breast. She leaned forward and pressed her breast against his hand and there it was, real and firm and *in his hand*. Her chest rose with his touch and he could feel the hardness of her nipple against his fingertips.

She was wearing a low-cut French bra, as he knew she would. He watched her fingers unbutton her blouse and open it and pull it off her shoulders. She dropped it on the floor. Her bra unhooked in front. Slowly, she opened it and freed her large breasts.

She grabbed his shaky hands and pressed them to her hard nipples. He ran his fingers over them, feeling their soft hardness, the heat. She closed her eyes and sighed. She bit her lower lip, raised her arms and stretched, arching her back like a cat.

Moving back a step, she turned around and removed her skirt. One button and a small zipper, and it fell. She wore pantyhose but no panties. She never wore panties. He knew that. When she turned back, he couldn't help staring at the dark mat of hair between her legs. He was mesmerized by the vision in front of him.

She tucked her fingers into the hose and worked them down. She stood back up, naked, and smiled at him. In the book, the author had said she was perfect. He was right. Joe's hand automatically covered his chin once again.

Julia leaned forward, closed her eyes, and parted her lips and kissed him. She frenched him. Her wild tongue explored his mouth, pressing against his tongue. He felt her fingers on his chest, unbuttoning his shirt. Her fingers worked their way down to his belt, to the button of his pants, to his zipper. He felt his knees weakening. She removed all of his clothes, then shoved him back on the sofa.

In the thirty-five years of his life, it was the first time a woman had taken over completely. She moved against him, rubbing her

hard nipples against his chest, licking his neck, nibbling her way down his throat, down his chest to his belly. She rolled her tongue in his navel and flicked her tongue through his pubic hair.

She kissed the tip of his swollen dick. Sinking her mouth on it, she moved her head back and forth, back and forth. Joseph thought he was going to explode in her mouth. He felt her fingers squeezing his balls. He pumped her, fucked the hot mouth of this gorgeous woman until she suddenly pulled away.

Swaying over him, Julia climbed on and rubbed her silky pubic hair and the wet lips of her pussy up and down the length of his erection. She was good and wet; and he could smell the musty, strong scent of her pussyjuice. He was ready to explode. His breath rasped in and out. Julia reached down and guided his dick into her. She shuddered for a second before her hips began a long, grinding, wet ride atop him. She leaned up. He opened his eyes and watched her face, flushed in passion. He watched her grab for the pleasure. She was one hot, fine woman. He craned his neck forward and began to suck her nipples, one at a time.

She shrieked. He was momentarily startled, until he remembered that she was a screamer. Her pussy was scalding—so hot, it burned and pulled at his dick. She bucked and rode him like a bucking bronco. He fucked her back, grabbing her ass and spurting his cum deep within her, driving his dick deeper and deeper....

“Oh, Baby!” she gasped. “Oh, Joseph! Joey! Giuseppe!”

She hit a high note as they climaxed together. She fell on him and lay there for a long time. She told him it was wonderful. Then she asked, “Where’s the bedroom?”

They lay on his brass bed, arms and legs wrapped around each other until she started up again and it was time for seconds, slow seconds, the way he had always wanted to do it the second time around.

He rolled her on her back, moving her legs wide to sink his dick into her. He fucked her like he never fucked before, like he always thought he could fuck. Julia was wild. Their sweaty bodies slid against one another in the dark room. It lasted an hour at least until she screeched a high note again and

pleaded for him to give it to her. And, once again, they came together.

God, it was great. She was great. She was perfect. Curled next to him, her hair disheveled, her lipstick wiped clean from her lips, she looked so beautiful and so fragile. She was the perfect woman. She even took the wet spot.

He didn't care anymore what her name was, or what kind of weirdness had been playing with his mind that day. This was one great girl and one great lay. She was perfect, even if the book he had reviewed wasn't. He had destroyed the book. It made him smile to himself, thinking how he had devastated that singularly inferior piece of fiction. It had two strikes against it to begin with: it was a mystery, and it had a sex scene.

The phone woke him.

"Hello," a gravel voice said at the other end of the line. "How are you and the bitch?"

Joseph sat up.

"Whatsa' matter? You recognize my voice, don't ya?"

Joseph felt his insides sinking. He had trouble catching his breath.

"It's me. Pitt. And I'm gonna get her. I'm gonna cut her up. Just like in the book." The voice started chuckling. "Catch y'all later." Then he hung up.

Joseph looked at his digital clock. It was after eight, and already dark outside.

But this was crazy! There was no such person as Robert Pitt. There was no such person as Julia Carondelet—yet there she was, lying in his bed on her stomach, the lower half of her body still under the sheet, her face covered by her long hair. He pulled the sheet away and ran his eyes over the length of her sleek body. She moved slightly and rolled her ass to him. God, she was lovely. She was a twenty-one-year-old's wet dream. And there was a madman out there who said he was going to kill her.

Joseph picked up the receiver to call the police and then thought about it. What the hell could he tell them—that he had just received a threatening phone call from a fictional character?

When a car raced by outside, he jumped, climbed out of bed

and peeked out at the empty street. Then he went to his desk and reached into the side drawer and pulled out the gun he had bought at a collector's show in the Superdome.

It was an English military revolver, a Webley .38 with a five-inch barrel and a blue steel finish, dulled from age. He opened the top-breaking cylinder and pushed the barrel forward. Dust rose from the cylinder when he removed one of the short cartridges.

The bullet had a round, lead head. He read the writing on the bottom: RP 38 s&w. He looked for an expiration date on the bullet, but there was none. He remembered reading somewhere, in another damn mystery, that bullets went bad after a time. But how long was that time? He remembered the salesman said the Webley was popular during the Second World War. The ammunition was probably just as old. He reloaded the revolver and put it on the desk.

"What are you doing?" Julia asked. She sat up and yawned. Her large breasts rose as she stretched.

"Does that gun have anything to do with the phone call?" The dark blue eyes were staring at him.

"Uh—"

"Who was it?"

He tucked his chin against his chest and said, "It was Robert Pitt."

She brushed her long hair aside. "What did he say?"

"He said he was going to get you, just like in the book."

"Oh." She didn't seem alarmed. Then again, in the book, she wasn't afraid before Pitt got her. She smiled and said, "You know how Pitt lies. He's just a bully. You aren't afraid, are you?"

"Uh..."

"You shouldn't be." She smiled. "You're far more intelligent than that creep. And remember the old saying, the strong take away from the weak, but the smart take away from the strong."

She got up, stretched again and said, "I'm going to take a shower. Want to join me?"

Climbing out of the shower with Julia, Joseph though he heard something. Wrapping a towel around himself, he crept through

the bedroom and peeked out at the living room. He was about to take another step when he heard the front door open.

"The phone," he called out to Julia. "Call the police!" Joseph reached for the gun. Still naked, Julia scrambled over the bed for the phone.

"It's dead," she said.

He could hear footsteps now. He wished he had a fucking machine gun. His mind began to play with him. What if the Webley didn't fire? What if the ammo was too old?

Julia began to make tiny sounds as the steps came closer. Sweat dripped down Joseph's temples. Perspiration rolled from every pore of his body. His throat was as parched as desert sand.

The footsteps stopped just outside the bedroom door. Joseph wasn't sure, but he thought he heard someone laughing—it was a faint laugh, a sick laugh, a maniacal laugh. He smelled something—something like stale beer.

Joseph blinked his eyes wildly to clear away the sweat and when he refocused them, Pitt was in the doorway. The man seemed larger in real life. Joseph raised the Webley and cocked the hammer. Pitt, the heavy-drinking knife man, was weaving in the doorway. He took a step in. A sliver of light from the desk lamp cut across Pitt's huge face, illuminating the hideous scar that ran from the man's right eye down to his jawline. Pitt's eyes looked drunk and bleary and mean.

Julia gasped.

Pitt snickered and reached into the pocket of his trench coat and came out with a long-bladed knife. Joseph held his breath and squeezed the trigger and...nothing. Joseph could see Pitt turn toward him. Joseph pulled the trigger again. It clicked, but no gunfire. Pitt laughed.

With both hands on the Webley, Joseph yanked the trigger. The revolver thundered. Pitt stopped moving. Joseph yanked the trigger again, and again the gun exploded. He pulled again and again and again until his gun was clicking and Pitt was on the floor.

For a full minute, Joseph didn't breathe. There was no further movement from Pitt. Joseph eased over and peeked at the body. Pitt was crumpled over on his left side, the knife

next to his head. Joseph kicked the knife away and waited. Then he poked the body with the barrel of the gun. Pitt didn't move.

"Is he dead?" Julia leaned over the foot of the bed, her eyes wide and anxious. Her breasts looked so round and full. Joseph wanted to touch them.

Instead, he reached over and touched Pitt's throat. He found no pulse. He felt the man's wrist next and confirmed it. No pulse. Then he sat back and fought, with all his might, to keep from crying.

The next hours were a blur. After a long discussion, they decided to just get rid of the body instead of calling the police. They couldn't find any forced entry into Joseph's house, nor any lock pick on Pitt. When Joseph pointed out that Pitt had a knife, Julia countered that they could have planted it. So they dressed, wrapped Pitt's body in two large garbage bags, dragged the body out to Joseph's car and dumped it, after midnight, next to the St. Thomas Housing Project. The project was crime-ridden. Let them get blamed for it.

Back at Joseph's house, they went straight to bed. He watched Julia pull off her clothes and stand there, her back to him, the yellow light of his bedroom bathing across the fine lines of her body. Joseph was already naked. He reached over and grabbed her ass. She craned her neck back and smiled faintly and he could see she was pale.

He worked his left index finger into her ass. She tried to pull away. He sank his right index finger into her pussy. She stopped moving and slowly spread her feet. Joseph went to his knees in front of her, rubbing his nose in her soft pubic hair, his fingers working both openings.

"Oh!" she moaned.

Joseph rolled his fingers in circles and she cried out. Rising on her toes, she grabbed his head to balance herself. Joseph fingered her until she was good and wet, then rose and bent her over the bed. He worked his dick into her pussy from the back side and fucked her doggy style. He grabbed her hips with his hands and rode her. Julia cried and bucked back.

Leaning up, Joseph sank his left thumb into her ass and she cried loudly.

"Oh, yes! Fuck me! *Fuck me!*"

He fucked her long and good, feeling her come. He continued fucking her until he could no longer hold it in. He exploded in her in long hot streams.

Curled next to him in bed, she cooed, "I'll never nag you or bitch at you or scream at you. I'll be the perfect woman for you, if you let me." Her voice was warm and loving. And she always told the truth.

He was in charge now, on top of her again, shoving his dick deep within her, feeling all the emotions he had always dreamed of feeling with a woman. She cried with each plunge, her voice wet with passion, her voice begging for him to give it to her.

"Yes. *Yes. More. More. MORE!*" She cried as he screwed her and continued crying until he felt himself coming within her.

"Oh, Joseph. Yes. *Yes. YES!*"

She wailed in ecstasy as no woman had wailed before. She was the perfect woman. She even fell asleep first.

A knock at the door woke Joseph. His clock said it was almost noon. He threw on his robe and peeked out the living-room window. There was a black man in a business suit using a small black portable radio to knock on his door. The man knocked louder the second time.

Joseph opened the door slowly, and the man took a step back, tucking the radio into his back pocket.

"Good morning," the man said, pulling out a black ID folder with a New Orleans Police star-and-crescent badge attached. "I'm Detective Nelson Dante. Homicide."

Oh! No! The name. In the book, Julia Carondelet had sex with a black detective named... It had disgusted Joseph.

Joseph saw his life flash before his eyes.

"Are you Joseph Perrier?"

Joseph nodded.

"Do you still own a Webley Mark IV, thirty-eight?"

"Huh?"

"You know, you're the only person in the city who's ever bothered registering a Webley Mark IV."

"Uh," Joseph tried to recover, but the detective was too quick. The man's eyes narrowed, as if he could sense the fear in Joseph. The man's eyes were brown and yellow. They were sneaky eyes. Scary eyes.

"I'm only asking because we took three bullets from a body this morning that came from a Webley Mark IV," Dante said, his face still and serious.

"You can tell that?" Julia asked. She had come up behind Joseph. She had thrown on one of his shirts. It barely covered her. In fact, with the last button undone, Joseph could see a hint of her dark pubic hair peeking out at them.

"Yeah," the detective answered, his eyes suddenly wide with excitement. "Our firearms expert can tell by the lands and grooves on the bullets. A Webley Mark IV leaves markings that are completely unique."

Turning to Joseph, Dante continued, "You still have the Webley?"

"Uh—"

"Of course he does," Julia answered for him.

A wide smile came over the detective's face. Then, rubbing his square jaw, he asked, "You don't happen to know someone named Robert Pitt?"

"No," Joseph answered quickly. A little too quickly, he told himself.

Dante continued, "I'm only asking because that was the dead man's name, according to fingerprints."

Joseph forced himself to keep from blinking.

Dante looked over his shoulder and pointed to the street. "And you see that Packard over there?"

Oh, no!

"It's registered to Robert Pitt." Dante took a half-step into the doorway and said, "Now, I'm gonna ask you again. You know a Robert Pitt?"

"We do," Julia answered. "Or rather, we did."

"Yeah?" Dante arched an eyebrow at Joseph and said, "What does she mean by 'did'?"

"He killed Pitt last night," Julia said.

The detective's face lost its smile. His eyes narrowed again. A pair of handcuffs materialized in his left hand.

"You have the right to remain silent—" Dante said in a dry, firm voice.

"The bloodstains are in the bedroom," Julia interrupted. "Next to the bed."

"—Anything you say can and will be used against you in court," Dante continued, slapping the cuffs across Joseph's wrists.

Julia always told the truth.

Joseph had made fun of that in his review.

"Wait!" Joseph said finally, when he found his voice.

Dante ignored him. The black dick was too busy eyeballing Julia, who was smiling that perfect-woman smile back at him.

WHAT WOULD MAMAW SAY?

WAYNE ALLEN SALLEE

Mamaw is my mother.

Actually, her name is Cecilia. Now that my sister's kids can talk, that's what they call her.

Like in some places it's "Nana" or "Gram," I call her Mamaw. I call her that out of sarcasm, the way she'll call me by my middle name when I'm getting blamed for something. Even when it's not even my fault. My father—he's an alcoholic—sometimes it's him that does wrong, like mixing the skim milk in the creamer with the 2 percent, or maybe not wiping down the can with kitchen cleanser.

I cover up for him, even though Mamaw still thinks he's a better man than I am. I mean, I'm thirty-nine years old next February, and I've never hit her once. Not once!

What it is, I feel sorry for him, because my mother acts funny towards picayune things. It's because of her he drinks, and it is because of her that I am still living at home with no social life to speak of. I read a lot, but not those soldier-of-fortune magazines that people who end up going crazy read. My neighbor

across the alley was a rookie cop who read all those magazines, even had *Guns & Ammo*, but that didn't stop a black man from killing him on a CTA bus. Had his gun underneath his armpit—Mr. Rookie Cop, who thinks he knew it all because the magazines told him so, was shot three times. In the middle of winter. His mother thinks that the paramedics couldn't save him on account of they were handling false alarms on drunk people that looked as if they were frozen to the sidewalk.

Mamaw and her lady friends don't have much of an idea what really goes on in the world.

They think—well, Mamaw makes them think—that I don't, either.

They are wrong.

I know all about what turns people on, what kind of fantasies they can have. I have fantasies when I'm bored with whatever book I'm reading or if there are holiday reruns on television. And cable sucks. We only get it because of it being on a trial basis. Kind of a gift from the city alderman, hoping he might get reelected. See, our neighborhood is changing. Blacks, Mexicans, even Arabs.

But there are still plenty of beautiful blonde girls who have absolutely no brains at all. Like those "actresses" pretending to be the Swedish volleyball team in those beer commercials.

That cop who lived across the alley, his mother had me come over and go through his things. Back in the eighties, when we were still in school, he'd give me his used comics, like *Half-Century Man* and *Mister 1934*. His mother, his own personal Mamaw—thought that there might be more of these kiddie books for me to take back across the yards. Like I'm reading comics at my age—Jesus Las Vegas!

I go up there, the guy had all these bondage books: paperbacks with house names. Blatant titles, unoriginal, and nothing that really turned me on. *The Monk's Secret Dungeon*. *Uncle Roger Licks My Cunt*. *Come in My Ear*. A far cry away from Sid Degnan, *Half-Century Man*, protecting Power City from The Original Sinner and Psycho-Urbanite.

Anyways, the thing that turns me on is exhibitionism. None of this bondage stuff. I looked through one of the paperbacks.

There was an illustration of a guy putting what looked like a curling iron up his girlfriend's ass. Me, I like looking at girls who are out sunning themselves naked. I don't have to see anything pink. Now, that's what turns me on.

I have a cheap camera from Walgreen's. What I do is set a mirror up and take pictures of myself naked. I like walking around the house without clothes on. I even go out on the back porch and stick my dick through the railings when it gets hard. Sometimes it takes a while because it is usually chilly by the time I can go outside and prance around.

I can get the pictures developed easy because I know this Pakistani down in the Loop who'll do just about anything. I have about thirty-five or forty photos.

I'm writing this in my diary, naked even. It's late July and really warm in my room. The door is open, and if the Mesekos peeked through their blinds, they'd see my ass. I like that thought.

I can't really walk around the house naked anymore that much. Mamaw stays home a lot, baby-sitting the grandkids. Her and Dad haven't had sex in maybe a year. I think it's because he can't get his dick up because of being falling-down drunk. I wonder if he'd get it at half-mast if he watched some half-naked brunette washing a car that wasn't even hers, soapy water running down the crack in her ass? What would Mamaw say about that one?

So here's where it gets good. I said, "Fuck it," I want to go somewhere and expose myself. There's this copse of trees past the cemetery on Ravenswood, and I went out there with my camera and an old cheval mirror I found in the garage. Took a roll of photos—nothing that would make model magazines, but I did get a nice blue-veiner thinking about all the traffic that I was hearing going by just the other side of the trees.

The place was a hangout for teenagers; I saw a lot of emptied beer cans, crushed in a macho way. Couple of burnt-out cars, a shitload of general trash. Some nice sitting area, though. Lots of trees to set the mirror up against.

I do this every three or four days, when I'm not working at the video store. The second week, I see something new.

I'm out there, still in my shorts that say OCEAN PACIFIC on

them—the mirror sitting on the ground. No glare from the sun, though. Mostly it has been overcast this summer.

I hear girl voices and sneak up a little hill, the kind good for motor scooters. That's when I see two girls on a blanket. They were only drinking pop. I watch for a few minutes, then see them taking their clothes off. Like they'd been waiting to see if anybody else was coming around. One girl slid her shorts off, and she wasn't even wearing panties. They had tan lines, so this might have been something new for them.

The photos I took came out like crap. Couldn't even see pussyhair, which is what turns me on most. That's what you usually miss in the movies.

I kept going back all summer. The girls were back at the end of July. Maybe we'd been missing each other, because their tan lines were gone. I had to get better photos; that was all there was to it.

I found that after about a half hour, they both had their eyes closed. The one who wore shorts without panties—her pussy was like a thin vertical mustache—was breathing real heavy, her tits laying off the sides of her chest.

I walked up real quiet and dropped chunks of rocks on their heads. It was the only way to get the pictures. I had already creamed my shorts. The other girl, she was kind of auburn-haired, I had to hit three times.

Because of her hair color, the blood didn't show up too much. I kicked the other girl with my foot so the wrong side of her face would turn away.

I took ten photos from every angle I could think of. The Pakistani charged me an arm and a leg to get these babies developed, plus he wanted copies for himself.

I wonder what would Mamaw say if she saw what a man I had become, if I could make my father a man again by showing him the photos, too.

And I get off all the time on the pictures. The girls will be buried this weekend, and the police have the usual suspects. But I know that I'll get tired of looking at the same old stuff. Sooner or later, I'll get tired.

My friend Jack tells me about this neighbor of his who lives

across from his two-flat on LeMoyne Street. She irons in the nude, he says—with the back door open, thinking nobody will be paying attention.

Well, the Pakistani guy is always looking for business.

And my mother is so fucking worried that I don't go out on dates and spend money on dinner and bullshit like that.

What would Mamaw say if she saw my photo album?



I'D GIVE ANYTHING FOR YOU

EDWARD LEE AND JACK KETCHUM

"Please don't do this to us, Clare!" Roderic pleaded from the imported flagstone steps of the great house.

Us, Clare thought. Thirty years old and still living with his mother. Jesus!

His voice called out nasal and forlorn behind her. "I'd give *anything* for you!"

How many times had she heard that in the last nine months? *Big deal!* She wanted to shout. *Can't you take a hint? There's nothing I want from you!* Instead, she turned.

"Look. It's not working out," she said.

He looked befuddled.

"What are you talking about? Things are great! You said you'd marry me!"

"Oh, Roderic, I did not," she lied.

Early on, eight long months ago, that was exactly what she'd said. At thirty-one, she wasn't getting any younger. And Roderic had millions.

Or, rather, his mother did.

"I'm sorry. I just can't see you anymore."

He went utterly vapid. "Is it...another guy?"

"Of course not!" she lied again. How dare he accuse her of sleeping around!

Anyway, Wardell wasn't just another guy. He was everything Roderic wasn't. Strong, handsome, assertive. And hung like fucking Dillinger.

She opened the door to the 300ZX—a birthday present from Roderic—and slid in.

"But what about Paris?"

She'd considered it. Paris might be fun. Except that Roderic's mother was going, too, and so was Fudd—the old lady's hoodlum manservant.

To hell with Paris. Wardell would be taking her to Cancún anyway after his next big score.

"Roderic, forget Paris. Our relationship is over. Get it?"

Obviously he didn't. But Fudd did. The guy was lurking by the side of the house in his long leather jacket, stacking a cord of firewood, dividing each round cut with one of those automatic log splitters. And the look he shot her said he'd be happy to split her neatly down the middle too. If anything, Fudd was loyal.

Mama apparently got the message, too. Clare could see her disdain pouring through the sitting-room window.

Goddamn crinkled old weirdo.

Hell, they were *all* weirdoes.

"Darling, please, come back inside. We'll sit by the fire, I'll open the Louis XIII. Please!"

For God's sake, he was *crying* now.

"Please, I—"

"I know, Roderic. You'd give anything for me. No, thanks."

She slammed the door and started up the car.

"Tell me!" He was sniffing outside the window. "Tell me what I can do to prove my love for you!"

Go play in traffic, she thought. *How about that?* You romantic putz.

She pulled out of the driveway. In the rearview mirror she saw him fall to his knees in Shakespearean anguish, his mother coming through the double oak doors and down off the porch to comfort him. Fudd glaring.

Poor Roderic, she thought. The man just didn't have a clue.

Wardell did.

She'd just walked into the apartment and already the deft, strong hands were unbuttoning her blouse, his tongue roving her mouth in greeting.

"You break the news to the wimp?"

She nodded. Now that it was over she felt a little guilty.

"God! He was devastated. I'm surprised he didn't take back the car."

His hands shucked off the blouse and pawed her naked breasts.

"He *can't* take back the car. He put it in your name for chris-sake, remember? The dumb little creamcake asshole."

"Well, you can bet he won't be paying the rent anymore."

Wardell had his penis out already, which he often referred to as "Papa Fuck" or "Mr. Meat Missile." Wardell was not subtle.

"Fuck him and fuck his mama's money. Couple days, my next big score comes in and we'll be *rollin'* in it. Gimme that ass, babe. Over here."

He stripped off her jeans and led her onto the couch, got down on his knees and began those oral preludes which never failed to grease her skids. His tongue was not particular about which orifice it tended. It tended each and it tended well. In moments she was lost in raging heat.

It launched her into another world—a great big wet wonderful *tongue world* where she was the queen and sensation was her daily homage. The cleft of Clare's ass became a playground, and Wardell's tongue was the troupe of kids swinging from the monkey bars. It was hard to think of buttlicking with any notion of sophistication; nevertheless, Wardell proved a master, wielding his skills with a brazen expertise. His hot tongue laved and prodded, licked and titillated, drew sloppy, wet swirls about the sensitive little starburst.

"Like it when I lick your asshole, huh?"

Clare, staked to the couch with her feet pinned backed behind her ears, could fathom no response to her lover's less-than-urbane inquiry. Instead, she moaned and sighed, then abruptly shuddered when—

"But now I think I'll have me a taste of this here pie."

—his tongue re-navigated itself to a northerly direction. Her anus, evidently, was but an appetizer; now it was time for the entree. Clare whined at the avalanche of feeling, a sudden spike of swoony, pulsing pleasure which staked her hips fast to the couch. Her pussy felt separately enlivened, a furred, pink-blushing icon which reveled at the worship of its congregation—in this instance, Wardell's mouth. His tongue slid hard up and down over the olive-sized clitoris; his mouth sucked the free-flowing fluids out of her pussy like fruit juice from a straw. He sucked so intensely that Clare thought the delicious suction might actually relocate her uterus to the couch cushion.

"Ooo, you big hot wonderful love-tongue, you!" she wailed. "Eat my pussy till I'm cross-eyed!"

But, of course, she already *was* cross-eyed. She was stupefied, enraptured, enfrenzied. Currents of pleasure speared her ass to the couch. Her clit felt plugged into a wall socket as she moaned her bliss to an empty ceiling. Her first climax erupted with the impact of a five-ton wrecking ball striking a dam. The dam broke, and out gushed its reservoir. Her pussy pulsed like a cock coming, like a great big throbbing dick shooting wild plumes of sperm....

"Here's a little something to help you forget that mama-rich dickhead, honey."

This, of course, was a meiotic—it was not a *little* something. Clare often thought of Wardell's crotch as a Burger King: Home of the Whopper. His cock was a masterpiece, a thing of mystic beauty while at the same time frightening because of its size.

He flipped her to hands and knees and, with no further overture, buried himself in her.

"I dare you to think about him with my dick stuffed up your snatch," he said.

And she couldn't. Not with Mr. Meat Missile prodding the bulb of her cervix. Not with Papa Fuck plumbing the deepest regions of her womanly hole. She reached down under him and fondled testicles which felt as large as cue balls.

What a fuckin' man! she thought.

Machinelike, his cock pistoned in and out. Each stroke quaked her, retracted her sex and beat the air out of her lungs.

"Oh, yeah," she moaned. "Yes! All the way in as hard as you can!"

With a snide grunt, Wardell obliged. To Clare it felt as though Wardell had just unreeled another three or four inches of hard cock into her slot. It was an excruciating mix of pain and mind-boggling pleasure. His cock was coring her like an apple.

"Uh-huh," Wardell promised. "I'll be bustin' my baby a *big* nut up this cooze. Honey, I'm gonna crank a load in you so hard my spunk'll be squirtin' out yer nose. You'll need the biggest hanky in the world."

Then—

Midstroke and midway to the gate for both of them, the telephone rang.

The answering machine kicked in. "Hello, this is Clare. I'm not home right now so please leave a..."

"Jesus Christ, you gotta be fucking kidding me," Wardell said.

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP.

No no no, thought Clare, *please, please don't let it be...*

"I'd do anything, darling," Roderic said, his voice drippy, weepy, sniffly, and disgusting. "I'd give *anything* for you...."

Wardell hadn't much cared for the telephonic coitus interruptus. So he'd worked off his lack of amusement at the expense of Clare's physical real estate. Not that she objected. Her orgasms ensued without abatement, in multiple fashion. What Wardell lacked in sophistication he more than made up for in cocksman-ship. Other than that, she knew next to nothing about him. He'd never elaborated on his occupational pursuits, claiming simply to be a "salesman," and Clare never asked what he sold—though she doubted its legal status. He was muscular and brusque and incredibly handsome. Also very...enduring. And for her, right now, that was enough.

That night, though, she slept fitfully.

Roderic consumed her dreams. Roderic, who wrote poetry all day long and doted on his mother—whose wealth, she had once read in *Forbes*, ran to the mid-eight figures—who would pick her up in his conservative gray BMW and take her to the best

clubs, restaurants, and shows, who would bring her gifts each week—jewelry, mostly—pay her rent, buy her a car, and leave delightful little cash envelopes beneath her pillow. Not bad for a girl nearing the far side of the hill, but...

...she guessed it was his mother. Crimp-faced, rouged, and paper-thin. *Eternally* sarcastic. He'd bring her home to the mansion sometimes for "romantic" little chats by the fire, sniffers of Cordon Bleu, and—disappointingly for Clare—pre-ejaculatory sex, and his mother would always be there when they arrived, nodding curtly from the sitting room and offering some cryptic remark like "I hope you're taking good care of my boy," or "Good boys like my Roderic are easily taken for granted, missy," always calculated to be discreetly rude. *Fuck you*, Clare would think, and offer up a smile instead. For Mama.

It was no way to live.

To make matters worse, Fudd was always there too—about as cheerful as a mug shot. Never saying a word, all black glances and subtle scowls, skulking around in black leather—driver's cap, mitts, and long-tailed jacket. She wondered how much the old hag was paying him to keep her ancient pussy stocked with pork.

The implication was clear: Mama Roderic would overlook Clare's gold-digging as long as she "took good care" of her "boy."

It was difficult, and it wasn't. On the one hand, Roderic was a loving, compassionate, romantic man. He was also fat and slack-muscled, pale as a fish belly, with a small, pathetic weenie that tended to give up its seed long before any serious amalgamation of genitals could be made.

Once while necking she had made the mistake of brushing his groin with the tips of her fingers. *Oooops*, he'd said. And showed her the wet spot on his custom-made Italian slacks.

On nights they actually made it to bed, he would usually have to apologize for the milky puddle on her belly moments after getting naked. "You excite me so much I just can't help it," he would tell her. There was no point sucking a dick that had spent its freight before she could even get it into her mouth. So that was out. And his own oral gestures proved equally futile, usually like a kitten lapping milk.

Which left her with her finger.

No. After nine months, restaurants and cold cash simply didn't cut it anymore—and Fudd and Roderic's mother coming with the package as they so obviously did only hastened her decision.

Besides, by then she had met Wardell. Who knew how to fill all the places Roderic left empty. *I owe it to myself*, she thought, *as a modern woman, to pursue my spiritual, sociological, and personal well-being. As well as that gigantic cock.*

Why couldn't Roderic understand? They simply weren't right for each other.

She didn't wish him any harm. She truly hoped he'd meet some frigid little blue-blood one day and live happily ever after. But...

She knew that some men would pine over a lost love for years. Become obsessive. Go to...extremes.

She hoped that wouldn't happen here. But maybe that was what scared her a little. Because there was something about poor little jilted Roderic that haunted her. Something deep in his eyes and in that forlorn, desperate promise of his...

...I would give anything for you.

Please Roderic, she thought, whatever you've got to give, take it elsewhere.

"Hey, love muffin." Wardell had awakened and was nudging her with something other than his hand.

It was an excellent distraction, and Clare was grateful. She provided a welcome silo. Her mouth. All that burgeoning cock inside her, the glans big as a baby apple.

"God, woman! You sure can suck good peter! Get it, sugar! Suck all that red-hot pecker-snot right *out* of that cock!"

Quaint.

But she did. Slipped a pinky into his ass to prod the over-large prostate as his testicles jettisoned yet another copious ration of semen.

And, at exactly the same moment, thought of Roderic—

Jesus, Roderic! *Go away!*

I'd give anything for you.

That goddamn promise. What did he mean?

What would he give?

His fortune? His inheritance?

His *life*?

Jesus Christ, she hoped not. She didn't think she was ready for that at all. Definitely not. But you had to think about it. Was the crazy little sonofabitch going to try to prove something?

Was Roderic suicidal?

Nah.

Even if he was, there'd be Fudd and Mama to tie him down for six years if necessary. Until he got over it.

No problem.

Except that he phoned every day. Luckily, he tended to do that while Wardell was out, taking care of his "salesman" duties. But she started to hate the sound of her phone ringing.

Please come back darling, darling please, please, we were meant to be together, I would give anything in the world for you darling please....

Good god!

Clare would never answer. But his calls were crowding her answering machine.

And at night he haunted her dreams.

Roderic in a tub, his slit wrists leaking cloudy red. Blue-faced in his BMW in a closed garage. Gunshot, poisoned, hanged by the neck.

His mother made scowling cameos. Shadowed by leather-clad Fudd, gloved hands opening and closing into creaking fists. "You take good care of my boy, missy," the dream-crone nattered. "...you take good care of my boy, good care of my..."

Each nightmare ended the same. Roderic's corpse, the black mouth opening wide, filled with pus and maggots, the death-rattle voice. *"I'd give anything for you."*

Wardell became the vehicle of her oblivion. She resolved to fuck and suck the little twerp right out of her brain. And that was fine until, exhausted, she eventually fell asleep. There he was.

"I'd give anything...."

One morning Wardell was in the shower, whistling "Love Me Tender," when the phone rang. Clare snatched it up.

"Roderic, stop calling me!"

"Clare, please," he whined. "Talk to me. Listen, I want you to come over."

"No!"

"Wait! Don't hang up! Listen to me. Mother and Fudd have gone to Paris for two weeks. We'd have the whole place to ourselves. Please!"

"I don't *want* to come over. I don't want to ever *see* you again! Get it?"

"Buh-buh-but...I love you! At least tell me *why*—"

"You're fat, okay?"

"I'll lose weight."

"You're pale as an albino."

"A tanning booth—I'll buy one."

"You've got no muscles."

"I'll join a gym. I'll start working out. I promise."

This was going nowhere. *No choice*, she thought.

"You come in ten seconds flat, and you've got a little dick!"

Cruel, sure. But Jesus, what could you do?

"A sex therapist. I'll go to a sex therapist! And I'll get one of those penile implants and..."

She was going to scream. She knew it.

"Because, darling, I'd give anything for—"

Suddenly the phone was snatched away. Wardell stood there buck naked and dripping from the shower, his dick bouncing like a springboard.

"Look, you little cream-cup fuckhead. Don't ya call here no more, understand? I'll kick your ass so hard your balls'll pop out your ears. I'll come over to that fancy mansion and burn it to the fuckin' ground and piss on the ashes and bury you up to your neck and shit on your goddamn head and when I'm done blowin' a nut up your mama's tired old ass I'll bury her right next to ya and shit on her head too. You take my message, dickbrain?"

God, Clare hoped so.

Wardell slammed down the phone.

The next day Wardell's "big score" came in. They flew to Cancún that evening. A month in paradise. Clare expected to work on her tan but it quickly became apparent she'd be working on

her libido instead. She didn't mind. Wardell's cock was a boom that never lowered, his balls a veritable sperm factory that remained in production round the clock.

The nightmare stopped.

And so did all thoughts of Roderic. She realized that one night with Wardell's cock stuffed so far down her throat she was wearing his balls like sunglasses. Indeed sex had proved her release. And it was a release she couldn't help but pursue.

If variety was the spice of life, then each day and each night of their vacation offered Clare another bellyful of ripe red peppers. And, to stretch the metaphor to its absolute limit, Wardell was never reluctant to pour liberal volumes of cream into Clare's coffee. *Where does it all come from?* she wondered... And best of all, Roderic was gone. Out of her mind.

Forever!

Wardell had to leave a week early; a sudden "business deal" had arisen. A "customer" had an interest in his "product." Clare lounged on the beach all day. Each night, in bed, she masturbated well into the night. All she could think about was her lover's interminably stiff cock, the plummy hot balls...her thoughts forever and solely of Wardell and his earthy love for her. Getting fucked by Wardell was akin to dropping a box of Godiva into the lap of a chocolate addict.

Clare left Cancún four days early.

On the flight back she was so antsy to see him she could hardly keep her hand out from under her skirt. Once she got into the cab, she didn't try.

His car was there in its parking space. Bags in hand, she dashed into the apartment.

"Wardell? Honey?"

No reply. "Love-muffin's home." She dropped the bags and ran into the bedroom. Stared.

And shrieked.

Wardell lay sprawled on the bed, his face a dark shade of scarlet.

"Parachute cord's the best." Fudd emerged from the corner, leather-capped and -gloved. "Piano wire's too messy. And nylon's unreliable. Last broad that dumped Roderic, I was doing a job

on her with nylon, and the damned thing snapped on me. It got ugly."

Clare could see the deadly ligature sunk deep into her lover's throat. His face had swollen to a queer balloon, strangely distended.

"You should listen to your messages," Fudd said. "The old lady's not happy, let me tell you."

He stepped forward and she screamed. *Last broad that dumped Roderic, I was doing a job on her...*

But it wasn't a garrote that Fudd held out to her. It was a chloroform-soaked towel.

Clare awoke in Roderic's room. She knew it instantly. Even though her senses skittered like autumn leaves in the street.

"Oh, missy." His mother sat erect in a fine cane chair opposite. Fudd was standing behind her. "You were supposed to take care of my boy."

Clare's tongue felt thick and sour. "We...we broke up."

"Broke up? You *dumped* him, you silly, selfish horse's ass! My boy is a gift to the likes of you! You know, you're not the first to treat him similarly, and Fudd always has been kind enough to give them what they deserve. But you? For some reason, I haven't the heart. Roderic loves you so."

She sighed, pigeon breast heaving beneath the frumpy dress. "You should listen to your phone messages, missy."

Clare trembled. "I—I was on vacation."

"I know. Cavorting, no doubt, with that detestable narcotics dealer. Unfortunately Fudd and I were on vacation, too. But if you'd phoned in for your messages you might have prevented all of this."

"All of what?"

"Poor Roderic. He's a nice boy but admittedly an eccentric one—with some odd ideas about proving his love. Fudd found him...outside."

Clare's mind swam in muck. Her nightmares all came back to her. Roderic shot. Poisoned. Hanging.

"He's...dead?"

"No," she simpered. "No, thank God, he's not."

Fudd scowled and plugged a cassette into the tape player on the sideboard and walked off into another room. *Hi, this is Clare! I'm not home now so please...*

Then Roderic's voice. "Clare! My love! Why won't you believe me? I'll prove it! I'll prove my love for you, prove that I'd give *anything* for you! Listen!"

A pause. A *snap*. A brief scream.

"That," the old woman informed her, "was my son cutting off his pinkie with a pair of tin snips."

The tape continued. Roderic sobbing. "There! Here's my proof. For each day I'm without you I'll cut off another part of myself. Good-bye, Clare."

Clare did her math, paling. She'd been away over three weeks.

Fudd reappeared with a blanketed bundle in his arms. He set the bundle on the bed. Undraped it and stepped aside.

Clare gasped. Her eyes bugged. She bent over and vomited.

"Clare! You're back! I knew you'd come back to me!"

Roderic's bright face beamed at her.

"Ten fingers, ten toes." Roderic grinned proudly. "And the rest, I pre-applied tourniquets and used a hacksaw. The legs and the left arm were easy. But the right arm... I bet you can't guess how I did it!"

She vomited again onto the plush Persian throw rug.

"I crawled out to the woodpile, tightened the tourniquet with my teeth—and stuck my arm under the automatic log splitter. It did a nice, clean job."

She knew that for the rest of her life she would never escape the sight.

Roderic swaddled on the bed. No arms and no legs. Just a living, talking torso.

"Do you believe me now? Do you believe me when I say I'd give anything for you?"

She could only croak a single word. "Yes."

"You've got your entire lives to spend together," said the old woman. She got up and shuffled toward the door. "In time I'm sure things will work out nicely. For now, of course, Fudd will remain. To see that you comply."

"Cuh-comply?"

Fudd smiled. His gloved hand twirled the garrote idly.

"Assume your responsibilities," said Roderic's mother. "And *without* a fuss. It's only fair." Her stern eyes held her fast. "I expect you to take very good care of my boy."

Fudd locked the door behind her. It took Clare a moment to realize exactly what the old lady was saying.

"Get your clothes off and get to it," Fudd directed. "You don't want to keep him waiting."

"Oh, darling," Roderic said. "Till death do us part! We'll have such a splendid time together."

For there was one part of himself Roderic *hadn't* cut off, and that part now throbbed erect for her.

Sort of.



THE PROVIDER

KYLE STONE

"I'm not a pimp!" Bryce cried. "I'm a provider. A caregiver."

"You're trying to make me dependent on you!" Galen shouted. "I need the taste of the streets!"

"They're trash, can't you see? They sell themselves for a fix!"

"And you don't? Who are you that you should presume to judge!"

"I'm only trying to save you from kids like Zane."

"Be silent!" Galen's voice exploded against the shadowed walls. The tall, narrow windows shook behind the velvet drapes.

Bryce stood his ground. He had seen the mindless anger, the searing rage, many times. He knew what it meant. "I have kept you from becoming an animal," he said softly.

Galen smiled, in control again. "So you like to think. If it gives you pleasure, go ahead."

Pleasure. The word, spoken by Galen's pale, blood-starved lips seemed stripped of meaning, an empty word with no associations.

Galen slumped back in the ornate chair, a pale hand curved

over each armrest. The blast of anger had drained him. His head was bent, the soft blond hair falling over his forehead. The nape of his neck gleamed ivory in the dim light.

Bryce knew this creature was incapable of love, but the knowledge made no difference. His fanatical devotion burned strong and hot as ever. At times, he knew that Galen hated him. At times when he was needed. Like now. But Bryce still clung to one fact: Galen needed him. And, every now and then, he would have to acknowledge it.

Galen raised his head and stared across the dim room, lit by the soft oil lamps he insisted on. His green eyes glowed dully. His face looked gaunt, the pallid skin stretched tight over the high cheekbones. Bryce looked away. He couldn't stand to see the one he loved suffer, but he must. It was all he had.

"Come closer, Bryce. I'm weak. You know when I'm weak." The voice was a whisper on the air, more like a subtle suggestion than words. "How can you turn away from me now? You know what to do."

Bryce nodded. Even after the fights, his pain, he knew he would open his shirt and kneel in front of Galen, between his long legs. Because only then, while Galen sucked his life blood from the plastic tube inserted over his heart, would he allow Bryce to touch him.

Bryce opened his shirt and knelt. He gathered Galen into his arms, guiding the pale head to his chest. He winced as he felt the hot dry lips touch his skin, felt the first strong pull. For a moment, he swayed and had to steady himself. Then his hand went to Galen's bent head, his fingers straying through the fine spun-gold hair. He could almost feel the strengthening pulse at the temples, under his fingertips. *Because of me*, he thought. *I am his life*. But his elation was brief. He knew anyone could perform this task. Others had before him. If he wasn't careful, others would again. He bent his head and touched the silky hair with his lips.

With a shuddering sigh, Galen pulled away, as always forcing himself to stop well before he had slaked his thirst. He laid his head back against the carved oak. Waiting. Allowing Bryce this one act of intimacy.

Bryce slid to the floor. As he undid the buttoned fly, he forced all thoughts out of his head. He, too, was hungry, with a thirst that would never be satisfied. The damp earthy smell made his senses reel as he opened his mouth to his lover's cool white flesh.

All too soon, it was over.

"We're little better than cannibals," Galen said with a lazy smile. He wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth with one finger. "We feed off each other."

"You are surprisingly whimsical sometimes," remarked Bryce, buttoning up his shirt. As always, he felt slightly sick after submitting to Galen. It was a delayed reaction that hit when he stood up. He made his way carefully to the table and helped himself to wine.

Galen stretched, lifting his arms to the ceiling, arching his back, twisting slightly at the hips with sensual grace. Already color had seeped back into his cheeks, staining the fine skin like crushed strawberries. The green eyes sparkled, a fire that gave no heat. "Get your jacket. It's time for you to go out."

"I told you—go yourself. You don't need me."

"I know." Galen was enjoying himself. It was as if the shouting and the intimacy had never taken place. They both knew that Bryce was powerless now, helpless to stop what would happen next.

"Galen, I'm not going."

"Aren't you my 'provider'? My 'caregiver'? You said so yourself just a few minutes ago." He smiled, the green eyes taunting, cold as ice, slicing into his soul.

Bryce sighed. "How many?"

"Three would be nice. See what you can do." Galen turned away, his mind already moving on to the designs he would sketch for the eighteenth-century movie that was his current project. It amused him to reproduce on-stage the clothes he and his friends had worn in the long-vanished days of his youth. It amused him still more when he was praised for the historical accuracy of his designs.

Bryce watched him leave the room, listened to his light step going up the stairs. He glanced at his watch. All the strength and

purpose seemed to have drained out of him. From far off in the bay, the low wail of the foghorn echoed his despair. Outside, the cool dampness of the evening kissed his lips with salt. Long ribbons of mist swirled along the driveway, hiding the low bushes and setting the trees adrift in a sea of fog. The sickly yellow glow of the wrought-iron gaslights made little impact on the gloom. Bryce shivered as he got into the car.

When the gates of the estate slid shut behind him, Bryce slipped a cassette into the tape deck, hoping the music would soothe him. After a few moments, he switched it off. *I hate him*, he thought, giving the wheel a savage twist to the right. The big car spun out briefly, then straightened. Rain spat at the windshield. Bryce took a deep breath and headed downtown.

He was always surprised by how easy it was to pick up boys. He had never had the desire to do so for himself, and the first time he had come here for Galen had been difficult for him. But merely a mention of Galen's connection with the movies was enough to gain the interest of the most halfhearted hustler. They were all eager to win his favor. They never could, of course. Except for one. Bryce winced at the memory, the tall, wide-eyed boy with the black hair curling down his back. Zane, a name as false as the angelic smile.

The fog was thicker near the water. The great black car slid through the deserted streets, gliding slowly through the swirling mist. Tonight's hunt took longer than usual, but at last he found two. They were friends, apparently. Once the fee was settled on, Bryce discouraged conversation. He preferred to keep his distance.

When they got back to the house, he found the studio empty. Bryce led the boys down the hall to the master bedroom, and knocked.

Galen flung open the door, a brocade robe draped carelessly over his slender body. He was naked underneath. "You took too long," he said. His green eyes glowed in the dimness. Over his shoulder, Bryce glimpsed the four-poster bed, a familiar tousled head, a long, pale thigh. "I've made my own arrangements. Get rid of them."

Bryce thrust his foot in the space between the door and the

jamb. "You promised—you swore to me you wouldn't go out. We had an agreement!"

Galen laughed. "You are a fool," he said. "You think you can contain me, my appetites, my needs? I am far beyond your feeble comprehension." He began to press the door against Bryce's foot, a steady pressure, without apparent effort on his part. "How do you think I have survived as long as I have?"

Bryce winced as the bones in his foot began to grind. Tears came to his eyes but he refused to acknowledge the pain, to back down before that pent-up malevolence. "I'm not afraid of you," he said, his voice shaking. "Do what you want. Kill me! Would that make you happy?"

"Happy? You are a bigger fool than I realized!" Galen gave the door a final excruciating squeeze.

In spite of himself, Bryce cried out in pain. "Damn you, Galen!"

"I was damned a long time ago, and you had nothing to do with it!" Galen released the pressure, kicked the mangled foot away. "Run the bath for me." He slammed the door in Bryce's face.

Bryce leaned against the wall, trying to control his ragged breathing. The boys had disappeared. He could hear their steps pounding down the stairs and across the hall. The front door opened. Closed. He was alone. Except for Galen. And Zane.

He wiped his face with his sleeve. "It's over," he whispered. But how can something be over which never really began? It was all a fantasy, spun out of his own heated imagination. He had tried—oh, how he had tried to make Galen desire him, need him. How he had tried to open his veins to that hot mouth and be drained to the point of floating between their two worlds. Only by doing this could he join Galen forever, be at his side, his shadow, his lover. But Galen had always refused, forcing himself to back off time and again, keeping Bryce at a distance by inserting the tube over his heart, so they would barely touch as he fed. Over and over, Bryce had brought home boys, young men, anyone whose eyes were needy, whose lips would ask no questions, whose bodies would not be missed if Galen became violent, as he did sometimes. Especially if there was no one there to stop him.

Slowly Bryce dragged himself along the hall to the huge old-fashioned bathroom. He would obey once more. But this time, there would be a difference.

He ran water into the bathtub, mounted on graceful clawed feet. He threw in handfuls of scented beads. It was agony taking the shoe off his mangled foot. Blood oozed from the crushed toes as he peeled back the sock. He had to keep stopping, letting the pain roll over him. At last, he lowered himself gently into the warm water. He wondered idly whether Galen had always been a sadist or if this had come on him centuries ago, with the Change.

The warmth was calming. The scented oils wreathed the room in heady perfume. The throbbing of his foot was almost pleasurable now. He reached out for the ivory-handled straight razor on the shelf behind him. Without pausing, he drew the thin blade across first one wrist, then the other. He watched, fascinated as his blood swirled slowly into the water. Then he grasped the tube above his heart and pulled. The unexpected pain jolted him, and for a moment he was afraid. Then the warmth swam over him again and he closed his eyes.

When he heard the door click, he opened them again. Galen was kneeling beside him, a silver goblet in one hand. The green eyes burned so brightly, Bryce blinked in pain.

"Fool," Galen remarked. He reached down and pulled the plug to let out the reddened water. "Never waste good blood." He pressed the silver goblet against Bryce's chest and watched blood ooze over the rim.

Bryce smiled as Galen's fingers touched his chest, squeezing the artery to pump the blood out faster. Then the smile faded as he became aware of another person in the room. Zane. Naked. Carrying a silver goblet. He was very pale and a deep scar bled dark against his neck.

"Come," Galen, murmured taking the boy's hand. "A token of my love."

Bryce tried to scream as the boy leapt at him and buried his teeth in his throat.

CICISBEO
JOHN EDWARD AMES

This is forbidden even to God—the power to undo the past.

There was a time, not too long distant, when I would fuck any man's wife if I got the chance. All that has changed. We learn from failure, not from success. And because I failed big-time at what I do best, I'm now holed up in Belize City hiding from two murder warrants back in the States. Because a velvet-voiced woman brushed her fingers against my wrist while I lit her cigarette, I smashed her husband's skull so hard that brain suds leaked through the cracks.

What you see is not usually what you get, and what you get is never what you want. So I killed her, too. None of this is fiction, *camerados*. Who reads these words reads the soul of a man.

Psychologically speaking, they say we can't look under our own hood. But I do believe that one reason why I've spent most of my adult life fucking married women is to punish men for insulting my intelligence.

Most men are pathetic losers, of course, caught somewhere in

the shadow between the idea and the reality. There are millions of them out there—an indistinguishable human wad—transforming their meaningless lives into bad soap operas, B-grade movies, dog-eared pulp novels. They've all killed 'slopes' in Vietnam or captained the high-school football team, or pronged the homecoming queen before she went on to Hollywood and became famous.

It's not the bullshit itself which piques me. Let them regale each other with tales of macho daring-do, each outstripping the other like boastful yarners around a Western campfire. It's their crude lack of audience awareness, their greasy-knuckled ignorance of the laws governing the willing suspension of disbelief, which makes me despise them and desire a fitting form of revenge. They lump me into the wad and don't credit me with the brains God gave that proverbial pissant, and that's their worst mistake.

So I simply nod, keep accepting the drinks they buy me, and hold my scheming mind carefully sequestered from their drunken asininity. I console myself with the thought that, soon, some buffoon's wife will be pointing her high heels to the sky while I make her see God.

Forgive my use of the present tense. Though my days as a *cicisbeo*—a lover of married women—are over, I still haven't reformed my thinking. Freud put it nicely: "Where Id was, there Ego shall be." Once my brains were all between my legs, and my hard cock was the cursor that pointed out the essential truths of my existence. Now it lies against my thigh like a flaccid slug while I ponder why. Like a eunuch who lusts in his heart, I know how it's done—I just can't *do* it.

I seduced Erin Lasalle the same way I seduced all my married ladies—I started by carefully selecting her husband as my next victim.

It was always the same. I made friends with the men first and pretended sympathy with the "life of the little day" in which they chose to live. From that point, it was usually easy to insinuate myself into their homes, then begin undermining and belittling the husband in the wife's eyes, in a thousand subtle ways.

As a couple, Shelby and Erin were prime candidates. It's the

stuff of literary cliché—sensitive, intelligent women married to rich Joe Six-packs who no longer bother to lift their leg off the chair when they fart, so it won't toot in front of the wife. Men who piss with the bathroom door open or sit around the living room with no shirt on, men who show the crack of their ass when they bend over the fender to work on their cars. They are sometimes good men, of course, but that hardly matters.

I met Shelby at a businessman's watering hole in the suburbs. I am—was—a corporate lawyer by profession, and Shelby had made his fortune as a hard-driving executron for the same data-processing firm which employed me.

He was an American stereotype, a self-made George Babbitt who mistook crudity for character. He bellied up to the bar beside me, late one Friday afternoon, and greeted me with a line of graffiti that was scrawled over the urinal back in the men's room.

"Sure Jesus loves you—but will he swallow?"

I showed hearty appreciation for his rapier wit, and he held two fingers up to the bartender, buying both of us another scotch. Physically speaking, he was as nondescript as Muzak: thirtysomething, thickset going to fat, dressed anachronistically in black calfskin loafers and a sport jacket with leather elbows. He was one of those men whose faces steadily bloat as they get drunker, until they look like distorted images in a chrome door handle.

As usual, I learned the story of his life during the next two drinks. If you've read Horatio Alger, you've already heard it. He was, of course, smugly full of himself, never once suspecting that he was merely a cipher in the arithmetic of commerce, one more fly buzzing around the molasses barrel of the marketplace.

"Fucking-A I've got money," he assured me, starting to slur his words as flecks of his spit spackled my face. "But I don't run with the rubber-wristed butthole surfers in the glitterati. My motto is, money talks and bullshit walks."

I approved the wisdom of this philosophy with a thoughtful nod. A buxom woman in a tight micro-mini joined her friend at the end of the S-shaped bar. Shelby elbowed me in the ribs, then cupped both hands in front of his chest.

"Oh, dem watermelons! If she takes her bra off, she'll fall on her face."

I nodded again. That, and the occasional "uh-hunh" is all they usually require.

"Know what, though?"

He was the type who would wait, so I said, "What?"

"Stand 'em on their heads naked, and they *all* look like sisters!"

He was obviously proud of that one, so I slapped my thigh twice while I was laughing. That earned me another drink.

Exactly how he segued to "the Nam" escapes me now, but soon we were in the fetid, dangerous jungles of Southeast Asia. His bloated face went into serious mode, and his eyes took on the famous "thousand-yard stare" of Those Who Have Crossed to Death's Other Kingdom. Oh, the treachery! Pretty little slant-eyed women with broken Coke bottles shoved up their cunts, waiting to cut an unsuspecting GI's dick off; little children with hand grenades taped to their bellies, luring friendly soldiers into deadly hugs; long-haired liberals back in the States, spitting on him when he arrived at the airport.

"Even today, when I hear a car backfire? I have to stop myself from yelling 'Incoming!' and diving under a table."

My face was somber and sympathetic. This called for a bit more than the usual "Uh-hunh." My tone was that of a man wallowing in *weltschmerz*. I shook my head in disbelief and said, "Goddamn rotten fucking war. Let me buy *you* a drink."

This was a stroke of genius. His eyes "lit up," as the pulp writers say, and I knew then that we had just bonded—he was going to invite me home with him.

"The war wasn't the problem," he corrected me. He pointed his finger at me and dotted an invisible "i." "It was the fucking politicians. We'd have *won* that fucking war, hadn't been for the nancy-boy politicians."

I nodded as if that had never occurred to me. He was slurring his words badly now, setting his glass down too carefully. I wondered when the invitation was coming.

"Yeah, the little milk-kneed, cheese-dick wussy boys in Washington. My motto is, don't step in something you can't wipe off."

"Damn straight," I heartily agreed.

He tugged his sleeve back to glance at his watch. "Lissen, Walt, I'm having a good time. Why'n't you follow me back to my place and meet the old lady, have a few more drinks?"

"Sure she won't mind?"

He flashed me an ear-to-ear smile as he struggled off the bar stool. His response was pure prophesy. "I pay the rent. Fuck her!"

Like most 'self-made' men, Shelby Lasalle knew the price of everything but the value of nothing—including his wife.

Or so I thought. Notice, I'm using the past tense now. Since then, my hubris has been squashed, and I've had a comeuppance. Two murders did nothing to alter the essential facts: the horror was not in the grisly crimes themselves, but in the paradigm shift which occurred in my soul. The old parameters of reality were suddenly and radically redrawn. In the span of a few heartbeats, I went from being the captain of my universe to "a bundle of vain strivings tied."

But I was euphoric with anticipation as I followed Shelby home that night. I had already somehow intuited that his wife would be the antithesis of him. All the way back to the suburbs, I fixated on his crude bumper sticker as if it were his epitaph:

DON'T LIKE MY DRIVING?

CALL 1-800-EAT SHIT

The Lasalles lived in a huge stone and cypress house surrounded by crape myrtle trees sporting red and pink flowers. We parked in the crushed stone cul-de-sac and Shelby threw a friendly arm around my shoulders, leading me inside. Erin's taste was evident immediately in the rich brocade draperies and furniture of fine Circassian walnut.

"Hey, Sugar Pops? You home?"

The beautiful woman who appeared after this cattle call literally took my breath away. Erin was in her late twenties, closer to tall than to medium, with a rich mass of burnt sienna hair, sea-green eyes, flawless opalescent skin. She wore a chartreuse wraparound dress and delicate crystal drop earrings.

But all that tells you nothing. I might as well describe France

from a road map. There was an ineffable something about her, a quality as subtle as flying neutrinos. The whole was far greater than the sum of the parts. And the very moment she walked into the room, I knew I must either have her or kill her. Never, however, did I anticipate doing both.

Shelby took no offense when he saw that I was momentarily transfixed by his wife. He gouged his elbow into me again and said, "She's got a hi-fi chassis, hanh?"

Much of what happened that first evening is vague in memory now, like images seen through a wet windowpane. I remember a delicious dinner of baby rack of lamb and broccoli flan; I remember Shelby getting drunker and drunker and louder and louder, discussing business in phrases such as "too much micro management" and "what's the percentage in that?" But most vividly I recall Erin nibbling at a sliver of cuticle and feigning interest in her husband's flummery while her sea-green eyes held me mesmerized.

And then, of course, there was the cigarette that sealed our fate.

We were seated around a chrome-and-glass coffee table in the living room. She slid the cigarette out of a filigreed case and then raised her glance toward me, smiling a brief Gioconda smile that made my pulse fire boosters. I don't smoke, but I had enough presence of mind to quickly pick up the gold mesh lighter lying beside the cigarette case and lean across the table toward her.

She only brushed my wrist briefly with three fingertips. But instantly I felt my groin warming like a toaster coil. That moment was a "peak experience," as the psychologists say. It redefined everything I had ever done, and gave new purpose to everything I would ever do.

But just as Icarus fell from the sky while old crones haggled over the price of bread, Shelby continued spewing his verbal effusions.

"—so I look the vee-pee right in the eye, hanh? And I tell him, 'Whale snot! Let's get on the same fucking page here, huh? My motto is, you don't pick up a happy baby.'"

Understand. For a *cicisbeo*, this first meeting with the husband and wife together is a delicate situation. He must be at

the height of his treacherous powers of seduction. He must present the husband to the wife in the worst possible light, yet appear to be urbane and gracious and sincerely fond of the husband. He must subtly, for example, steer the conversation toward emotional and political hot topics just to get the husband haranguing from his soapbox, voicing dogma the wife has heard a thousand times before. The *cicisbeo*, by delightful contrast, then portrays himself as a cool-headed man of equitable temper, a man above cheap displays of petty pique.

All of this went well. By midnight, I no longer had to bother with the subtle arts of seduction. Shelby was so snockered that he was telling Polack jokes and saying such things to me as, "That's a ten-four, ol' buddy!" I finally realized it was time for me to leave when he once again cupped his hands in front of his chest and sang:

"Lit-tle girls have pret-ty curls,
but I like aureoles."

Again, this was a moment of delicate treachery. The look I gave Shelby had to convey locker-room camaraderie, while I had to turn a "pained face" to his embarrassed wife. My glance had to say, "You are far too sensitive and good for this, and I must leave to ease your pain."

Luckily, Shelby missed my Janus-faced acrobatics. Or so I assumed. I left shortly afterward, convinced I had planted the seeds of intrigue which would soon bloom into an illicit romance. Instead, I had merely set the stage for a bloody Grand Guignol—and though I was to be the star, the script was being written by others.

As I said, we learn from failure, not from success. Had I not been made myopic by a long string of amorous victories, I might have questioned the textbook simplicity of seducing Erin Lasalle.

Despite her incredible beauty, she was essentially a feminine rube. She was histrionic, melodramatic, a poseuse, Madame Bovary redux. All of which made my task both easier and more interesting.

Shelby assisted things, too. Several weekends in a row, he invited me home with him, drinking himself into a stupor each

time. Soon the guest room downstairs was ready for me any-time I didn't feel like driving home late at night.

I suffer from nyctophobia, an excessive, unnatural fear of darkness and the night. Consequently, I'm an extremely light sleeper. Early one Saturday morning, after another night of revelry during which Shelby changed his motto ten times, I was asleep in the guest room when quiet sobbing from the living room awakened me.

I smiled, instantly realizing what was afoot. Just to test my assumption, I deliberately waited instead of getting up right away: sure enough, the sobs grew gradually louder as Erin worked at "inadvertently" waking me up.

I brushed aside the curtains over my bed and saw that dawn was just then rimming the east in a pink blush. I smiled again, knowing that Shelby would be asleep for hours yet. My initial tryst with his wife had finally arrived.

I slipped into my trousers but left my shirt off, glancing into the mirror to be sure that my hair was appropriately tousled. Then, my face a mask of empathy and concern, I went out into the living room.

Erin had thrown herself onto the sofa, her face buried in a pillow. She wore a gunmetal silk robe that was tied loosely at the waist.

"Erin?" I called softly. "What is it? Are you all right?"

"Oh!"

Startled, she pulled herself up into a half-reclining position. The movement tugged her robe open farther and showed me the creamy deep valley between her breasts. She said, "God, did I wake you? I'm so sorry."

"No, no...I was already awake. I was...thinking about things."

My tone was pregnant with innuendo. She scooped over a bit and I settled in beside her, wrapping a protective arm around her. "What is it, Erin? What's the matter?"

A sob hitched in her throat, and she pressed her face into my bare chest. Hot tears trickled down my pectorals.

"Oh, Walt! God, I'm so miserable! Is it possible to...to be in love with two men?"

I could go on recreating our banal dialogue, but need I both-

er? After she had sufficiently created the impression of a faithful wife caught in the powerful undertow of my charms, I kissed her. As they usually do at this point, she went into the heavy Lamaze breathing mode a bit too rapidly, turned on more by the drama of the situation than by her hormones.

One of Shelby's many mottoes was the observation: "The only good job is a blowjob." I understood his enthusiasm for this sentiment after spending an hour on the sofa with his wife. Understand: the whole point of seducing married women is to humiliate the husband in their eyes. Therefore I've perfected one technique in which I take—took—great pride: the ability to maintain my erection after the first orgasm.

White strings of warm sperm were still clinging to her lips when I spread her shapely coltish legs wide and entered her. My randy virility shocked and delighted her. No doubt Shelby fell asleep on top of her immediately after his pathetic climaxes.

I, too, have a motto: *pecca fortiter*, "sin bravely." Not until I heard Shelby upstairs, hawking up his morning phlegm, did I finally roll off his wife. She ducked into the downstairs bathroom and took a quick whore's bath, then hurried back upstairs to her husband.

That thrilled me far more than the sex itself: the thought that he would now heave his flabby suet against her after she had just felt my trim muscles. She had just left Paris to return to Toledo.

It was all too easy, and I was already bored. But what you see is never what you get....

They say man is created in God's image. If so, I can only conclude that God must be mentally ill.

I have always marveled at the ease with which a psychopath can operate in our supposedly rational society. Men well liked by the police and their neighbors stack human body parts in the freezer and fry young boys' muscles in Crisco. But until I met the Lasalles, psychosis was something I read about in Thomas Harris novels or watched on CNN.

Erin and I progressed from weekend trysts on the sofa to regular daytime meetings during the week. My schedule at the office was flexible, and I knew Shelby to be a nine-to-five workaholic.

As I said, I was already bored with the ease of the actual seduction. My usual pattern, after I've done the Black Act with a married woman, is to abandon her sometime between several weeks and several months later. In Erin's case, her exceptional beauty and talented bedroom acrobatics kept me around for months.

One afternoon, just as I had finished thrashing between her Ivory Snow thighs for the fourth or fifth time, I heard the unmistakable sound of someone grunting—as if in pain.

The noise came from my right side. I rose up on one elbow and glanced toward the louvered closet door. For the first time, I noticed that it stood ajar a few inches. A canker of doubt suddenly formed in my mind.

Semi-tumescent penis flopping against my thigh, I crossed to the door and threw it open. Abruptly, cold tentacles gripped my heart.

Shelby was crouched like a man having a bowel movement. He wore nothing but a woman's teddy—a camisole top attached to loose-fitting panties. His lips were painted, cheeks rouged. His face was flushed, and his hand gripped his hard-on like it was a microphone.

It all fell into place in a nightmare gestalt and, in that moment, I realized everything; He had watched us every time, with Erin's willing complicity. And I had been duped, humiliated, turned into a cat's-paw by this vulgar buffoon. Where I thought I had triumphed and gained revenge, instead I had provided the entertainment.

Even then I might not have killed him. But when he suddenly duck-walked a step closer and seized my man-gland in his mouth, rage exploded behind my eyelids in flashes of neon red intensity. I knocked him back into the closet, his teeth raking the underside of my prick, and seized the small but solid woman's dumbbell from the corner beside him.

I can't remember how many times I coshed him with it. I do know that the first few blows didn't kill him, and it was perhaps after the dozenth or so swing that I first noticed the clotted stuff, like aspic, clinging to my face and arms.

I finally staggered backward and glanced toward Erin, waiting for her scream.

Instead, she was laughing—laughing so hard and hysterically that her naked tits jiggled.

“You pussy!” she taunted me. “You vain little piece of queer-bait! He was twice the man you’ll ever be!”

Only then did I realize that she was insane and daring me to kill her, too. So I did. My arm was too tired to inflict the cranial damage I had wrought on Shelby, and she, at least, was probably able to have an open-casket funeral.

They’ll find me eventually and lock me up in a place where men will insult my intelligence every day. Only now, there will be no revenge. I’ll nod my head while they lie to me, say “Uh-hunh,” from time to time while they describe the horrors of combat or the joys of fucking homecoming queens. And maybe, just maybe, I’ll think once too often about how much I liked it when Shelby Lasalle took me into his mouth.

I’ll have no choice, because what you get is never what you want.



DJISM

STEVEN SHARP

Qolhin rouged her nipples, watching the mirror. Perfect. The cinnamon-based rouge even tasted good, sharp and hot. She fussed nervously with her makeup, changing little. She resisted the impulse to look out from her private room into the scraglio's common area.

A faint tapping came at the cedar door, and Malu sidled inside. The tall, handsome Runi wore the traditional Zuoavi harem guard's uniform: loose pantaloons, black vest, scimitar at his waist. Qolhin embraced him, tracing his back's sinewy lines with her slender fingers, her nipples shoving the flimsy vest pieces to the sides. Malu stroked her head with one hand and fondled her round bottom with the other, fingers seeking her hot cleft. She turned her lips up to meet his, shuddered as his tongue tripped across her teeth.

Heart pounding, she loosened Malu's pantaloons string. The floppy pants fell to his ankles, and she knelt to undo the ties. Malu was a eunuch: his dusky prong lacked the usual retinue of hangers-on.

"Are you sure you can...?" she asked, looking up. The Runi

smiled, teeth bright against his beard. He grasped himself in one hand, marshalling blood into his organ. It swelled and hardened above his clenched fingers, touching the tip of Qolhin's aquiline nose. Her tongue darted out, playing across the dark knob, wetting it as it hardened, running her tongue and lips down to his fingers and back up. She opened her mouth wide, taking in the velvety head of Malu's linga. She rolled her tongue over and under the large knob, feeling it swell and harden, craning forward to engulf his shaft, drawing in her cheeks to create suction, flickering her tongue from side to side.

Qolhin undressed while the harem guard looped a leather thong around himself, trapping the blood. He tasted the carefully drawn rings of rouge. He lifted her in his heavily muscled arms and gently laid her on her bed of plump cushions covered in crimson satin.

His eyes devoured her, admiring breasts like large ripe pears, her narrow waist, the flare of her hips. Qolhin raised her knees and parted her legs, revealing a ruby-pink garden amidst a jungle of glossy raven curls.

Malu pierced her wet center in one smooth plunge. His hard pectorals flattened her teats to the sides, trapping the taut nipples. Qolhin drew him in and wrapped her lower legs about his. Her hips rose to meet each stab of Malu's thick blade.

Her door slammed open, striking the opposite wall. There in the doorway stood Altab the Adequate, Bey of the Ninth District of the Emirate of Maskoresh, master of this house. His eyes flared wide above his hooked nose. Behind him stood two household guards, Hakim and Ahmad.

Altab sputtered: "What... How can this... Get... Oh, futter!"

"Exactly my thoughts," Hakim said. The agitated bey didn't note the sarcasm.

Qolhin and Malu disentangled themselves. Qolhin strove to calm herself, gathering up her garments and dressing. Malu stammered out some pitiful explanation.

"Silence!" Altab screamed. A drop of sweat fell off the tip of his nose. "Guards, take this Runi to my holding cell."

"Shall I kill him, O bey?" Ahmad asked, stroking his sword.

"No, don't kill him. Just lock him in the cell." Altab's greed

outweighed his anger; Malu would fetch a decent price through a slave factor. After all, he was strong, skilled with a sword, and tempered: perfectly suited for work as a harem guard. Hakim winked at Qolhin and helped Ahmad lead Malu away.

Qolhin endured Altab's harangue, slipping in the occasional "you're right" and "I'm sorry" at appropriate moments. Ahmad returned, reporting that Malu was secure in the holding cell. Altab stopped yelling, pinched his big nose, and closed his eyes.

"Get me Garfzanon the wazir," he said at last.

"At this hour?" Ahmad asked.

"Just do it. Garfzanon never sleeps."

Ahmad salaamed and departed. After a few more admonitions, Altab also left Qolhin's room and the seraglio.

Qolhin was a virgin when Altab bought her, but the bey was not her first lover—a household guard, a quiet fellow named Mamor, took her before Altab finally called her to his bed. A membrane full of sheep's blood then—thank Belsha for San Xra's worldly advice!—made Altab believe her still a virgin. Didn't that say something about him? Not that he could be fooled (all men can be fooled), but that after purchasing a beautiful young virgin it took him two weeks to make love to her?

She'd had other lovers, household guards, servants, the occasional guest. Tambi, Harolan and San Xra did the same. The women liked sex; why didn't Altab?

Qolhin wasn't tired, having napped earlier to prepare for her rendezvous with Malu. She took a cloak and went out into the high-walled garden. Maskoresh was a desert city, where fiery heat baked the town for months, but winter's cold could be deadly, too. She strolled, restless and frustrated, through avenues of date and olive and expensively watered flowers from far coasts. The red and gold moons overhead warred to dominate the sky over the world of Melaxa, while she mentally replayed the night's events. Malu's hard back, how it felt under her fingers, his hot tongue licking the cinnamon rouge; Altab's consternation, Ahmad's cruel wish to kill Malu, Altab sending Ahmad out into the night to fetch the wazir Garfzanon—

Qolhin hurried inside. Tambi dozed in the round commons of the seraglio, naked, full teats falling to the sides of her broad

chest. The black girl didn't stir while Qolhin opened a concealed door, revealing a hidden passage. She went up the corridor until she was outside the bey's own bedchamber, and looked through the peephole. Altab paced, feet scuffing the handwoven carpet. Qolhin loved that carpet: a golden phoenix flew from a crimson fireburst into a pale blue sky dotted with alabaster clouds. Altab refused to let the women have it for the scraglio. He always kept the best in his own room: the golden candlesticks where scented tapers burned, the wide bed covered in cool Sujinese silk sheets, the teak divan with plush purple pillows.

A knock on the door, and Ahmad's narrow face intruded. "Garfzanon the wazir, O bey—"

"Show him in, Ahmad."

Garfzanon was a tall, fat man whose rounded nose whispered of western blood in his ancestry. He wore a full turban that made him seem even taller. He sat on the divan, drawing up his robe's loose red fabric. Qolhin noted Altab's irritation as he sat on the stool planned for his guest.

"Thank you for coming, O wise man," Altab began, but Garfzanon cut him off with a raised hand.

"Never mind the idle chatter, sirrah. You summoned me in the dead of night; presumably you need magical help, and are willing to pay many shekels for the best wazir in Maskoresh."

"Um, yes," Altab agreed. "Exactly how many shekels might that be?"

The fat magician's little eyes absorbed the room, taking in the gold, the silk, the teak, the artwork. Qolhin suppressed a giggle; now Altab would regret hoarding all the best for himself!

"No more than you can well afford, Your Adequacy. The exact amount I cannot say until you tell me your problem and I solve it for you."

"It's the women in my harem, O mage. They are lustful and unfaithful. They practice their wiles on every man they meet. Tonight one of them tried to seduce my Runi harem guard—imagine, a eunuch! And she was succeeding!"

"I can't even keep household guards," Altab complained. "In the past five years, I've had twenty men to fill four positions."

"Including the present four?" Garfzanon took a candied date

from a tray and licked sugar from the brown fruit's wrinkled skin. Qolhin's mouth watered; she loved candied dates.

"Yes. So far I haven't had trouble with them. Rahim and Abdul are catamites and seem content with each other, Ahmad is a sadist who cares not for women, and Hakim is an Anonite dervish who has pledged he will not lay a hand on my women."

"A hand?" Garfzanon mumbled around a mouthful of fruit.

"Or any other organ."

"I mistrust Anonites. Their ethical code is too stiff."

Altab shrugged. "That code assures me Hakim will not offer my girls anything else too stiff." So that was why Hakim, though clearly interested, had not responded to Qolhin's overtures.

The wazir swallowed. "Why are they so lewd?"

"Who knows?" Altab dissembled. He knew why; if he acted as a man to his women, they would be less unfaithful.

"Perhaps a magical guard," Garfzanon suggested. "I could conjure a djinni for one thousand and one days and nights of service."

"How would you keep him from trifling with the girls?" Zuoavi legend was rife with tales of love affairs between mortals and djinn.

"The djinn are clever. I can't guarantee that any command would keep one from dallying with your girls. Therefore I will make the djinni grow huge, his manhood too large for any intercourse, vaginal, anal, oral, or manual."

Goose bumps rose on Qolhin's arms and breasts. An organ so large...perhaps there could be too much of a good thing.

"Excellent," Altab said. "When can you do it?"

Garfzanon scratched his bearded chin. "I can be prepared by the day after tomorrow. That should give you ample time to deliver two thousand gold shekels to my home."

"Two thousand? Ridiculous! Five hundred," Altab offered.

"All right—two thousand five hundred."

"No, no! I'll pay you one thousand."

"Most generous," the wazir demurred. "I will accept, at your insistence, an additional one thousand, for a total of three thousand five hundred shekels."

Qolhin stifled another giggle.

"It shall be done," the bey said at last, glowering. He escorted Garfzanon out. Qolhin hurried back to the seraglio, awoke the other girls, and told them what she'd heard. The four young women sat cross-legged in a circle, knees brushing, and Qolhin was struck by the contrasts between them. She was a Zuoav, olive complected with lustrous raven hair, her figure average in size but exquisitely formed. Tambi was from Mbe, tall and black, with abundant hips and bosom. From Armada, newest to the harem, Harolan was plump and blonde. Doll-like San Xra, an amber-skinned beauty of oriental Yakanga, had jet hair framing high cheekbones and almond-shaped black eyes. Voluptuaries sought such variety in their harems; why had Altab gone to the expense and bother when he had so little interest?

"This is terrible," Tambi said.

"We may never have sex again!" Harolan cried.

A faint smile curved San Xra's delicate lips. "When has Altab's conduct ever given us reason to expect his plan to succeed? For example, where is our guard now that Malu's gone?" She gestured around the commons.

"This could be our last chance," Harolan said.

"I claim the camel boy," Qolhin said. Leaving, she heard Tambi and Harolan quarrelling over the gardener.

Quiga the serving girl rushed into the commons. "The bey is bringing the wazir to the seraglio!" she said. A moment later, Altab and the fat sorcerer entered, followed by Hakim and Ahmad.

Garfzanon inspected the spacious commons, noting the high-domed ceiling, his lips and brow drawn so close together that Qolhin thought his shapeless nose might pop right off his fat face. He had the guards roll up the carpets, then meticulously inscribed a chalk circle across the tiled floor. He drew strange symbols inside the circle.

He surveyed the room again. "Is that woman part of your harem?" he asked Altab. Quiga pouted and left at the bey's command. Qolhin envied her; although plain, the servant had more freedom and chance for romance than the beautiful but cloistered seraglio women.

Garfzanon began chanting. The candles in the room dimmed. They did not extinguish, or gutter, or waver as in a breeze; the light simply weakened, its power fueling Garfzanon's conjuration. Bluish mists formed in the circle. Tambi shrieked, "Juju!" and fled to her room, her derriere's soft hemispheres jiggling under the satiny pantaloons. The smoke solidified into a muscular blue-skinned shape. The djinni's head was shaved except for a thick hank of blue hair bound into a long queue. His eyes were crystalline turquoise set in pools of wet silver.

"Who summons Jazzam of the djinn?" he rumbled in a profundo voice that made Qolhin's nipples tighten and crinkle.

"I, Garfzanon of Shen, wazir and sorcerer, summon thee."

"Why?" Jazzam asked, testing the invisible cylinder that trapped him in the circle, hands moving as though on glass windows. The size of his blue fingers made Qolhin clench her legs together. She heard San Xra's sharply indrawn breath.

"In the name of Shavat, master of spirits, I command you. For one thousand and one days and nights, you shall guard the women of this harem, in this seraglio. Bey Altab the Adequate shall be your master. Should any man try to touch the women, without Altab's leave, you shall stop him and hold him captive for Altab. Do you vow to faithfully perform this command?"

Jazzam struggled against the force enclosing him, biceps and pectorals straining. Unable to escape, he shrugged. "I so vow." Garfzanon made complex hand motions. Jazzam grew to seven times a tall man's height, his head barely below the domed ceiling. His breechcloth shredded and fell away.

There it hung, limp and blue, as long and thick as Qolhin's thigh. San Xra whispered: "Behold that linga." Qolhin nodded, eyes and mouth wide open. Harolan swooned.

Altab bade Jazzam conjure himself clothing, then ordered the women to their rooms. He told Ahmad to carry Harolan to her chamber. Ahmad quickly found himself dangling from Jazzam's great hand.

"Help!" Ahmad squawked.

"This one attempted to lay hands upon one of your women, O bey," Jazzam said. "Shall I pluck off his head, or rend him limb from limb?"

"Release him!" Altab yelled. "Did you not hear me tell him to carry Harolan to her room?"

Qolhin watched from her chamber's doorway. The djinni let Ahmad loose. The guard dropped eight feet, then scrambled to his feet and away from Jazzam.

"I heard, O bey."

"Then why did you seize him like that?"

"I received no approval from you, as my vow requires."

Garfzanon shrugged with raised upturned palms. "I commanded him as you wished."

Altab glared at Garfzanon, Jazzam, Harolan, and Ahmad in turn, then spun and left the scraglio, muttering. Hakim spoke.

"O great Jazzam, I am Hakim of Jhendwhar, dervish and humble servant of Anon. May we speak sometime of the spirit world?"

"A dervish? Prove it." Colorful spheres floated around Hakim, conjured by a flourish of Jazzam's fingertips.

Qolhin had heard of—but never seen—a whirling dervish. Warning the others to stay back, Hakim drew his sword and whirled, becoming a blur of flapping robes and flashing steel. It ended so quickly Qolhin feared he had failed; but then she saw he had slashed each floating bubble.

Delighted, Qolhin ran to hug Hakim, but found her way blocked by a huge azure hand. Hakim winked at her over the giant palm. She retreated, angry with herself for forgetting.

"Dervish," Jazzam said, "visit me later. Now I must meet my new charges."

Hakim salaamed to the djinni and Qolhin. Showing Ahmad ahead, he left, wagging his thick eyebrows at Qolhin.

"Please introduce yourselves," Jazzam invited.

The djinni's guardianship was thorough. Jazzam's hearing, smelling, and sight were preternatural. He spelled the secret passage so none could enter or depart through it. He never left the commons and never slept, although he often closed his eyes in contemplation. Once San Xra, whose tread was so light that she could walk silently on brittle papyrus, tried to slip past while he meditated. His blue hand encircled her gently and hoisted her back into the room's center.

"No man may touch me without Altab's leave," San Xra said.

"That is so," Jazzam affirmed.

"*You* just touched me, without Altab's approval." Her eyes gleamed, sure she had caught him in a breach of his vow. Qolhin stopped playing her flute to listen. She knew the Yakangan girl was cleverest of them all.

"I am not a man."

San Xra's eyes narrowed. "If a dwarf or an elf came here, you would let him ravish us?"

"I would let no creature harm you; however, my vow does not pertain to nonhuman males, nor to women."

San Xra turned away and retired to the bathing chambers. Qolhin went to her own room, pondering Jazzam's words.

Could they somehow get a nonhuman male past the household guards? But dwarves cared more for ores than cros—just like Altab!—and elves thought human women barely better than animals. Also, Maskoresh seldom had visitors of those races; when it did, Altab's women would not likely learn of them; even if they did, they would have no way to contact them; and even if—it was impossible!

What was Jazzam's last comment? Women? Qolhin knew how two men like Abdul and Rahim could do it; Mamor had liked that with girls and boys alike. Qolhin enjoyed that way, but real love-making satisfied better. But two women—how? Too many seams with no needle!

She undressed and crossed the commons, where Jazzam was constructing a harp large enough for him to play. She felt him watching until she closed the bath chamber door behind her.

In the room's center, two white ceramic tubs sat side by side, head to foot, so bathers could face each other. A plush red pad surrounded the tubs to sop up any spills. San Xra lay stretched out, only her face and rounded golden knees above the water. Hearing the door, she opened her eyes and sat up. A cluster of soap bubbles clung to one small breast, almost covering its tiny brown nipple.

Qolhin scattered perfumed soap in the second tub. A small fire pot heated a steaming brass caldron, which she tipped to pour hot water. She eased into the patchouli-scented tub.

"I've been wondering about what Jazzam said," Qolhin said. "I can't think how to get an elf or dwarf to come here."

San Xra smiled gently. "We would take no joy in a dwarf lover, and no elf would desire us."

"I thought of that." Qolhin pinned up her hair with ivory combs and soaped herself. "What did Jazzam mean about women? How his vow allows..."

The Yakangan girl met Qolhin's soft brown eyes with her darker gaze. "He will not interfere if we please one another."

"But...how would we do that?"

Water running down her petite body, San Xra went around to the side of Qolhin's tub. "Like this." She took Qolhin's face in her hands and kissed her.

San Xra's lips were softer than a man's, but her sweet tongue probed just as yearningly, between Qolhin's lips, across her teeth, dancing with her tongue. Small hands glided down Qolhin's neck to cup and caress her full breasts. She felt her nipples tightening and a warmth growing below, not due to heated water. Qolhin fondled San Xra's smaller breasts in response, and the eastern girl drew her up and out of the tub.

It was novel for Qolhin to stoop to kiss. San Xra's silky skin felt so different from a man's rough, hairy torso. San Xra led, fingers gently raking Qolhin's flanks, tickling her cheeks, probing the soft spots between. Then the oriental girl knelt, kissing Qolhin's other lips, sliding her tongue up to Qolhin's button.

With one hand, San Xra's slight fingers ran from Qolhin's breasts to her belly to her bottom, kneading tight nipples, nuzzling the downy skin of her midriff, tracing teasing fingertip whorls around the globes of her derriere. San Xra used her other hand to penetrate and probe the Zuoavi girl's quickly moistening cleft, tentatively, then more surely.

San Xra separated her pinkie finger, damp with Qolhin's juice, and pushed it through the puckered brown ring of her sphincter. Her hand's rhythmic delving offset her darting, capricious tongue and lips. Qolhin's heat and tension built as the eastern girl's tongue tip rolled over her engorged hard clitoris. The room's light brightened to a golden glow. Qolhin trembled with the urgency of her climax, and suddenly her pelvis bucked for-

ward and her knees buckled under. She sank quivering to the pad, San Xra greedily following to lick the last of her climax from her.

When Qolhin's vision cleared and her heartbeat slowed, San Xra guided her through reciprocation. San Xra smelled and tasted of jasmine and salt and musk. In later days, they initiated Harolan and Tambi. Jazzam liked to watch, and somehow having the huge spirit observe intensified Qolhin's excitement. She almost stopped missing men. Almost.

Time floated past. Jazzam loved music and singing and dancing, so they often performed for him, usually unclothed. All could dance, San Xra played the lute, and Qolhin was a good flutist. Harolan could play tambourines and bells, and Tambi sang in a full contralto. Hakim sometimes visited, to talk with Jazzam and tell jokes that seemed puerile and pointless to Qolhin. She laughed anyway; she liked Hakim. One afternoon he came unexpectedly while they danced to Jazzam's harp music.

Tambi's breasts swayed solidly as she danced, her smooth dark flanks and long legs shining with summer sweat. San Xra sat in lotus, playing her lute, crossed legs centering attention on her glossy, inverted pyramid. Harolan did a slow series of sumptuous backward handstands, blonde hair sweeping the carpet, pelvis thrusting sharply up with its pink center winking. Qolhin's filled lungs kept her teats upright, and her ripe mouth, pursed to keep an O of air running into the flute, made an embouchure most men would find alluring, if not maddening.

Hakim goggled, licked his lips, and addressed the giant djinni. "Is that a camel-tethering post in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?"

Qolhin looked. Along Jazzam's left leg the white linen stretched cylindrically taut. She gasped, spoiling a minor-key run. The djinni lusted for them, tiny though they must seem!

Without missing a chord or a note, Jazzam responded: "Neither. Are my charges not lovely?"

"Indeed," Hakim said. He gazed at each girl in turn.

"I must remind you," the djinni's bass voice rumbled, "I can permit you to do no more than look."

"Of course," Hakim agreed, calmly shifting his robes. "I came here to talk philosophy. Why would I be interested in beautiful naked women?" He wiggled his eyebrows at Qolhin.

Jazzam grinned, showing his pearly teeth, larger than a man's hand. Hakim stayed, telling feeble jokes that Jazzam already knew. The girls danced while Jazzam's huge harp played a frenzied melody. At length Hakim rose and left, wiping sweat from his face with his sleeve.

Jazzam's frenetic plucking and strumming died away. Qolhin called the girls together and they whispered. Harolan sprang off to the bath chamber, returning with an armload of precious oils. They anointed each other while Qolhin spoke to the djinni.

"Garfzanon promised Altab he'd make you so huge you couldn't have vaginal, anal, oral, or manual intercourse with us. He succeeded in that."

Tambi and San Xra pulled off the djinni's pantaloons. The magnificent linga stood free amidst a thicket of coarse turquoise hair. It was nearly as tall as San Xra, and thicker than Tambi's waist, medium blue, darker at the mushrooming head, with shining highlights from sweat.

"Although we have no single aperture to pleasure you, we can combine to do it."

Slick and glistening with oils, the four climbed into the djinni's lap and converged around his pole. They clasped each others' shoulders, tall Tambi in front with her feet straddling the boulder-sized testicles, short San Xra opposite, Qolhin and Harolan to the sides. Eight oiled breasts ringed the upper shaft; eight slick thighs closed firmly midway down; eight luscious lips and four dancing tongues rained kisses onto the engorged head. They raised and lowered themselves, building a rhythm, warming the fine oils. Each time Qolhin knelt, her pelvis drew away from the hard linga, but when she rose again her silky groin rubbed up and then down on the pulsing length of Jazzam's mighty sword. Jazzam stared, vacant-eyed. A vein twitched in his linga right against Qolhin's straining teats. Qolhin felt a rush of heat and light, saw San Xra trembling, heard Harolan moaning. The women rose and squatted faster,

a blur of thighs and bellies and hips and breasts. Mouths sucked and hands stroked the djinni's colossal blue baton. Tambi thrust her long tongue forcefully into the long purple slit bisecting the head of Jazzam's giant linga.

Jazzam cried out, and his hips jumped. Qolhin fell onto his heaving blue belly, clasping San Xra for support while the djinni spasmed. Tambi hung on tightly, toes clutching Jazzam's hair. Harolan, in the helpless center of her orgasm, lost balance and fell on the djinni's quaking leg.

Crystalline liquid like quicksilver mixed with topaz exploded from the dark knob and soared straight up. Jazzam's jet of djinni djism lanced into the domed ceiling's center and burst through. Plaster rained down into the commons.

Tambi squeezed the djinni's slick blue shaft hard as her own climax hit her. A second spurt of djism, less forceful than the first, shot halfway to the deflowered dome. The spent djinni moaned and slumped backward, his massive head striking the wall and crashing through into the hidden passage.

What Qolhin saw next amazed her. The second shot of djism expanded—no, separated into hundreds of tiny specks which flew and darted, scintillating with bright blue sparks. Individual djism cells swarmed like a cloud of cobalt midges. A few left the crowd and sped to the women, seeking moist, warm places. Qolhin felt a tingling mote zoom past her wet labia.

The djism swirled like a pearly blue cyclone, rising to disappear through the breach in the ceiling. A few stray sparkles raced through the door toward Quiga and the other servants of Altab's household.

Sounds from the streets: feminine screams of alarm, squeals of pleasure; male voices a welter of confusion and anger. Altab arrived, red-faced. "What in the...?" He stopped, staring stupefied at the nude women and disrobed, ruborous djinni.

A mob broke into Altab's home. Rahim and Abdul ran into the scraglio, saw the djinni's giant linga, and exchanged wistful glances. Ahmad herded household servants inside, prodding laggards with his sword. Finally came Hakim, whirling in the manner of dervishes, holding off the mob. Qolhin shuddered; Hakim's scimitar dripped blood.

"Bar the door!" Hakim hollered. Jazzam languidly extended one leg, putting his foot in the door frame. He winced when knives and clubs struck his foot, but meanwhile pulled up his pantaloons. The girls also dressed.

"That raggie-taggle out there is no threat," Hakim said. "But the emir will come soon, with real soldiers. Jazzam, can you take us away from here?"

"I am bound to this seraglio."

"Can you move the whole seraglio?"

Jazzam frowned. The room spun and broke away from the house, taking along the bath and the women's rooms. The spinning seraglio rose high into the sky. Qolhin felt ill and swallowed hard to quiet her stomach. Altab sat mumbling on the floor. "Stay away from that gap." He pointed to where the hidden passage had been. "Women, to your rooms, servant girls with you. I don't want you men accidentally inciting Jazzam.

"The city will go crazy," he continued. Qolhin listened from the doorway of her room. "What will happen to the women touched by your seed?"

Jazzam smiled. "Any woman of childbearing age, not already pregnant, will become so."

Hakim scowled and said, "I thought as much. We need some way to offer reparations."

Through the gap Qolhin saw a magic carpet flying toward the seraglio, carrying a tall, fat man in garish red robes.

"Hakim!" she cried, pointing.

He whirled and looked, then beckoned Garfzanon closer.

"A good place to start," he said, winking at Qolhin.

Qolhin couldn't get comfortable. The howdah she shared with Tambi was as good as howdahs got—an uneven surface atop a smelly camel. But her belly's unwieldy weight bothered her so much that she couldn't even eat candied dates.

She saw Hakim ahead, shepherding the caravan through the south gate of Maskoresh. The gatekeeper, Altab the Unwise, salaamed each camel. He was luckier than Garfzanon, Qolhin reflected.

Hakim had explained: "A foolish bey is harmless without his

office. But a wazir's magic is locked in his head. So the emir took it, head and all."

Altab's and Garfzanon's wealth went to assist women caught by the djism. Almost every noble and rich merchant considered his harem ruined. Six hundred camels, each carrying two women, now left Maskoresh. Hakim could guide them to a mystical desert tribe, eager to take in the women and cherish the half-djinni children. As to wives and daughters, Qolhin supposed that husbands and fathers would grow to accept the blue-skinned children. Jazzam had been dispelled to the spirit realm.

Qolhin tried to imagine her future life, married to one of the tribe's dervishes or mystics or fakirs. Hakim said they were lusty people who would appreciate the djinni's seductresses. Imagine: four thousand impregnations in a single afternoon.

She hoped to have twins.



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